

EMERGING FROM THE ECHO CHAMBER:
AN ACTIVITY THEORY PERSPECTIVE
ON L2 TEACHERS OF ADULT
EMERGENT READERS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Linguistics

The University of Utah

May 2012

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The University of Utah Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

The surge in second language adult emergent readers and the push for professionalization in the field of adult education has shifted conversations among language teacher educators, program administrators, teachers and researchers alike in the direction of mutual understanding and collaboration in an effort to target the needs of both teachers and learners. There are many strands of these conversations that present tensions, especially those related to funding and policy; however, on the whole, the energy around this topic is conducive to qualitative transformation in the fields of L2 teaching and L2 teacher education.

This ethnographic case study explores the teaching worlds of two ESL teachers of adult emergent readers. Guided by an activity theory framework (Engeström, 1987, 1991, 1999), this dissertation uncovers prominent relationships and inherent tensions within the activity systems of the teachers. In doing so, the important role of teachers' personal practical knowledge and beliefs are revealed along with the inextricable reality of the teaching and learning context within which they develop their teaching practice. Principle findings include the following:

- 1) professional learning opportunities are critical components to teacher development and teacher empowerment, but the structure of these opportunities factors heavily into their efficacy, and

- 2) empowering teachers through collaborative decision-making within programs, creating space for peer interaction, and promoting professional growth are paramount to a healthy, satisfied teaching force within a program.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	viii
Chapters	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Problem Statement	2
Scope of Dissertation	4
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	6
Teacher Knowledge	8
Teacher Learning	22
Community-based Adult Education - Framing the Context	29
Conclusion	42
3 ACTIVITY THEORY	44
Foundations of Activity Theory	45
The Evolution of Activity Theory with Engeström	49
Activity Theory in Educational Research Settings	58
Operationalizing Activity Theory	64
Conclusion	68
4 METHODOLOGY	69
Design and Rationale	70
Context	73
Participants	83
Data Collection and Analysis	91
Trustworthiness	95
Researcher Positionality	103
Ethical Considerations	107

5	CONTEXT AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS	109
	Modeling the Activity System	109
	Representing the Activity Systems	115
	Conclusion	118
6	EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ACTIVITY SYSTEMS	119
	Uncovering Tensions within Activity System Relationships	119
	Primary Contradictions	120
	Secondary Contradictions	132
7	CONCLUSION	167
	Implications of the Findings	167
	Limitations of the Study.....	169
	Contributions of the Study	170
	Future Research	181
	Conclusion	183
	APPENDIX.....	184
	REFERENCES	187

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
2.1 Borg's framework for teacher cognition.....	13
2.2 Teacher knowledge development throughout career	15
3.1 The mediational model	46
3.2 The structure of human activity	47
3.3 Engeström's Triangles	50
5.1 Sofia's activity system at the Bright Future Academy	116
5.2 Nancy Ann's activity system at the Global Partnership Program.....	116

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have so many people to thank for supporting me along this journey. I would like to first thank my supervisors for their patience and guidance along the way. My chair, Dr. Steven R. Sternfeld, was an invaluable resource to me academically and emotionally. Steve, I knew our styles of communication and ways of being in the world were complimentary and to me, that was an essential component for my success. Thank you for the many opportunities for growth that you provided me over the years, most importantly the chance to be involved with Project ‘New Eyes’ in the Czech Republic. I also wish to thank Dr. MaryAnn Christison for her unyielding belief in me. You are the reason I returned for my doctorate in Linguistics. I am very grateful for the leadership opportunities and creative freedom you afforded my colleagues and me. My professional development will never be as great as during the years I worked closely with you and the other graduate students. Dr. Martha Bigelow, you were an unexpected and delightful addition to my supervisory committee. I’m so fortunate that you came to our University to speak on second language acquisition by adult emergent readers. I knew the moment I met you that we were meant to work together. Thank you for the guidance and wisdom to conduct this research in a meaningful way. I thoroughly enjoyed all of my time with you in Minnesota and I’m so happy we’ll be colleagues for life in this field. Dr. Rachel Hayes-Harb served as the silent force that drove me to the finish line. Thank you for your attention to the important details surrounding deadlines and policies; these are areas I

have yet to master. I appreciate your support and your encouragement and I hope you know you had more to do with me finishing than you probably realize. I first met Dr. Thomas Huckin in a discourse analysis class during my Masters program. It was an instantaneous connection for me because you had just the right combination of wit, edge, intellect and compassion. Taking part in your rather politically charged class during the presidential elections of 2000 opened my eyes to a whole new understanding of the power of language and the power of action. Underlying this study is an empowerment element that was certainly ignited deep down by your influence. I also want to thank my early mentors in the program and others in the department who have supported me along the way and celebrate this triumph with me. I especially wish to thank Dr. Adrian Palmer for being a silent, but steady supporter.

I have to extend warm thanks to my participants ‘Sofia’ and ‘Nancy Ann’. A teacher is never more vulnerable than when someone is observing them in action. I am so grateful to you and your students for letting me into your classrooms. Thank you for being so willing to meet me for interviews and conversations about your teacher knowledge and practice. It was a pleasure to work with you during this research process and I know we will collaborate again in the future!

I am indebted to my colleagues in the Linguistics program with whom I have grown over the years. We had countless celebrations and faced various challenges; we grew professionally, personally and emotionally through this endeavor. You’ve seen me at the best and worst of times. You’ve talked me out of quitting and celebrated with me as I’ve reached various milestones and experienced breakthroughs. You’ve taught me the most out of everyone during this ultimate climb. The memories will guide me for years to

come and the experiences will inform my work with future students, colleagues and administrative staff alike. I love you girls - Zuzana, Ellen, Tamrika, Kristen, Anna, Mara, Karen, Sara and Eleonore!

I also want to thank my new colleagues at the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence. I was hired right as I rounded the bend in this long process. Thank you so much for supporting me as I made the final writing push, as I prepared for my oral defense and as I finished the final edits for the thesis department. Beverly, you saved me in the end and I'm so grateful and touched by your support. Vanae, thank you for always being willing to reach out and help in any way possible! I'm so lucky to be working with such a wonderful team.

The greatest support a doctoral student can receive along this journey is emotional support. For the majority of my emotional support, I have to thank my family, friends and, of course, my furkids. Mom and dad, you have been relentless in your support and love. I am surprised myself that you continued to believe in me, even as I faltered and second-guessed myself. Thank you for everything. Without you both, I honestly would never have reached this goal. This PhD is yours, too! Dad, I'm honored to share the title Dr. Farrelly with you. To my brother Johnno, from a distance you gave me a strange motivation to finish. If we get a second round at this life, try not to one-up me so much. (wink!)

To all of my friends, the cheerleading over the years and constant reminders to enjoy the sunshine, the trails, the rock and the snow - well, it certainly added some time to this process, but it was time that I would never take back. The memories of summits,

rock faces, deep powder and numerous fabulous adventures abroad served as the food for my soul when it began to feel hunger. I love you all more than I can express.

To my beloved furkids Seamus and Ronan, I owe you a lifetime of romps in the mountains for that is what you've given me. Thank you for getting me out of the house and away from the books for appropriate chunks of time. You kept me fit and happy and reminded me that life in the hills is the good life, after all. You're both with me forever!

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of English language learners (ELLs) who have not yet developed literacy skills due to interrupted or unavailable formal schooling in their home countries are being enrolled in community-based adult English as a second language (ESL) programs. Many of these second language (L2) adult emergent readers¹ are immigrant populations who may have had up to a fourth grade education or less. In addition to these voluntary immigrant populations, there are many ELLs arriving regularly through refugee resettlement programs. Many of these newcomers are also adult emergent readers, who have not yet had the opportunity to acquire literacy in any language, including their mother tongue (L1). In some cases, this phenomenon exists because the L1 does not exist in written form and in other cases it is because they did not have the opportunity to attend school due to nomadic lifestyles, poverty, political unrest or a number of other reasons.

¹ L2 refers to any language learned after the native language. Given that the context of this study is the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, the learners in question will be referred to from this point as *adult emergent readers*. In addition, this collective of students will often include learners who are beginning readers as class levels in language programs often mix the two groups together. The common denominator is that they had undeveloped or underdeveloped literacy skills when they arrived to the United States.

The surge of adult emergent readers to the United States in recent decades is due to large numbers of refugee populations being resettled in the United States from countries with exceptionally low literacy levels nationwide, such as Somalia or from refugee camps where there were no educational opportunities. This is the case of many camps in Tanzania, which have housed Burundi refugees since 1972. Many refugee populations have lived their entire lives in refugee camps, never having known an educational system or having held a job prior to resettlement. According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2008), the United States received 50,700 new asylum claims² in 2007 (almost 10% of all claims worldwide). In Salt Lake City, Utah, the site for the current study, there are two refugee resettlement offices, which resettle up to 800 new refugees annually. In addition to large numbers of individuals with refugee status, Utah has seen a tremendous increase in immigrant populations in recent years. According to one source,³ between 1997 and 2006, the state of Utah received 8,353 individuals with refugee status and 41,885 immigrants.

Problem Statement

In addition to adding rich diversity and often newfound vitality to their new communities, newcomers with immigrant or refugee status have an impact on various systems within their local community, including public schools, workforce services,

² A refugee may seek a new asylum claim if he or she is experiencing persecution in the home country on the basis of nationality, race, religion, membership in a particular social group or political affiliation. The rights of refugees and the underpinnings of asylum claims were determined at the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in Geneva during 1951 and amended only once in the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees established in New York in 1967. More information is available at www.unhcr.org.

³ www.fairus.org

housing and community-based ESL service providers. In addition to the basic need to acquire English to live in the US, newcomers are often required by resettlement organizations to participate in ESL programs until they have secured employment in the local community. Many of the community-based service providers have long waiting lists of ELLs who are seeking ESL classes or a one-to-one ESL tutor.

In many programs, there are not enough ESL teachers to serve the growing number of adult student populations. In addition to this situation is a general sense of helplessness experienced by many ESL teachers and service providers relative to using instructional practices that are appropriate and effective for adult emergent readers. Many ESL teacher education programs focus on techniques and strategies that have been successful with literate learners and those with formal education experience. While some of these strategies, such as Total Physical Response (TPR) (Asher, 1969), are successful with adult emergent readers in promoting oral language development and building vocabulary, the majority of the strategies that have been developed based on research with literate learners are often not effective with adult emergent readers.

This dissertation study was born of a simple desire to make sense of the classroom practices of L2 teachers of adult emergent readers, to better understand how the practices interact with their existing teacher knowledge, and to discover how teachers make choices about their practices. In addition, I hoped to uncover the challenges they face as they develop both their practice and their knowledge base in this relatively new teaching context.

Scope of the Dissertation

This dissertation describes the classroom practices and practical knowledge base of adult ESL teachers of emergent readers as they navigate challenges within the larger systems in which they work. I have chosen to use activity theory in order to provide a more holistic view of the context of adult ESL programs that serve adult emergent readers and to better understand how this multilayered context impacts the teachers. Guided by the work of activity theorists (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1987, 1991; Sannino, Daniels & Gutierrez, 2009) and researchers who have applied activity theory (Blin, 2005; Kim, 2011; Mwanza, 2001; Tsui, 2007), I have investigated the following research questions from a sociocultural, interpretive perspective within an activity theory framework:

1. What characterizes the classroom practices of L2 teachers of adult emergent readers
2. What constitutes the professional knowledge of L2 teachers of adult emergent readers?
3. What context-dependent relationships and tensions shape both knowledge and practice for the teachers in this study?
4. In what ways can a better understanding of these classroom practices and context-dependent relationships and tensions inform professional development specific to teachers and learners in this context?

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the purpose of this study, highlighting the need to explore teacher knowledge and practice, as well as teacher learning and development within the domain of teaching adult emergent readers. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on

teacher knowledge and teacher learning and professional development in both mainstream education and language teaching settings. Chapter 3 discusses activity theory, which is the conceptual framework and analytical tool guiding this study. Chapter 4 outlines the qualitative methodology chosen for the present study. Chapter 5 presents a description of the modeling of the activity systems under investigation, namely two ESL classes for adult emergent readers. Chapter 6 reveals the findings of the study through a discussion of relationships and tensions uncovered in the two activity systems. Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the dissertation with a discussion of the limitations and contributions of the study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study aims to make sense of teachers' classroom practices and professional knowledge through the use of activity theory, which highlights relationships and tensions that contribute to a more holistic view of the teachers' lived experiences. I set out to investigate what teachers do in the adult ESL literacy classroom so that I could better understand the strategies they employ and why they employ them, determine how they integrate learning from teacher education and professional development opportunities in the classroom and discover what challenges they face in doing so. In the early stages of this inquiry process, I uncovered certain political realities that I knew existed at the institutional level, but I was initially unaware of the extent to which they would factor into my study. As it became clear that exploring classroom practice would not be as simple as observing what teachers do and investigating their decision-making process, I shifted my focus to exploring teachers' interactions with institutional macrostructures to allow for the complexities and richness of the story that will unfold in this dissertation.

To situate my study in the existing literature on L2 teacher education, professional knowledge and professional development, I highlight research that allows for a better

understanding of the interplay among teacher cognition,⁴ teacher learning, teacher classroom practices and teacher development in both mainstream and language teaching contexts. The term teacher cognition is often used interchangeably with teacher knowledge, the former being a larger term that often encapsulates a range of topics including teachers' decision-making, teachers background knowledge, teachers' practical knowledge, teachers' beliefs and knowledge structures that will be noted in this dissertation (Borg, 2003; Kagan, 1990). Given the breadth of research available on teacher knowledge, learning, practice and development, this review will focus primarily on studies conducted with in-service teachers, rather than preservice teachers; however, in order to target the early stages of knowledge formation in teacher education programs, I will need to review some studies involving preservice teachers.

Research on teacher cognition spans a wide range of areas that address and impact teacher learning, practice, and development. Studies can be categorized in numerous ways reflecting various subtopics (e.g., beliefs, decision-making) (see e.g., Bailey, 2006; Borg, 2003; Burns, 1996; Phipps & Borg, 2008; Qing, 2009) or levels within one topic (e.g., content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and practical knowledge) (Shulman, 1987). Researchers have focused on what teachers actually do in the classroom as compared to what teachers report they do (see e.g., Farrell & Lim, 2005). Some studies have explored the role of experience in teachers' abilities to access teacher knowledge

⁴ Teacher Cognition is often used interchangeably with Teacher Knowledge, the former being a larger term that often encapsulates a range of topics including teachers' decision-making, teachers background knowledge, teachers' practical knowledge, teachers' beliefs and knowledge structures that will be noted in this dissertation (Borg, 2003; Kagan, 1990). Unless otherwise specified, teacher knowledge and teacher cognition are general terms that capture what teachers know and believe.

and theorize practice (see e.g., Dahlman, 2010; Johnson, 1996; Tsui, 2003). Teacher knowledge itself is so vast and all encompassing. Shulman (1987) states

Indeed, properly understood, the actual and potential sources for a knowledge base are so plentiful that our questions should not be, Is there really much one needs to know in order to teach? Rather, it should express our wonder at how the extensive knowledge of teaching can be learned at all during the brief period allotted to teacher preparation. (p. 7)

To Shulman's point, the ensuing review of literature on teacher knowledge in both mainstream and language teaching settings supports that teacher knowledge cannot be fully acquired and developed in a teacher education program, but will continually develop and evolve throughout the career of the teacher.

Teacher Knowledge

The study of language teacher knowledge is strongly informed by research on teacher knowledge conducted in general education settings dating back to the 1960s. At that time, it was recognized that in order to know more about how learners learn, researchers would have to go beyond observing classroom practices and explore the teacher thinking that informed those practices. Initially, much of this research was focused on teachers' interactive decision-making in the classroom and applying these findings to teacher education (Clark & Peterson, 1986). This focus on decision-making was limited in that it had strong undertones of behaviorism and seemed to limit the understanding of teacher knowledge to discrete behaviors and student outcomes without giving consideration to the various factors that influenced decision-making, including unanticipated problems in the classroom, teachers' educational backgrounds, context, and teachers' beliefs.

Elbaz (1981) moved the research agenda forward into an exploration of teachers' practical knowledge, which has remained an important domain for research on teacher cognition to this day (Meijer, Verloep & Beijaard, 2001; Tsui, 2003). Her work on practical knowledge created space for a more holistic exploration of what teachers do in the classroom and why, taking into account the context and practical problems faced by teachers. Exploring practical knowledge caught on with researchers working in the field of teacher cognition and soon became a well-established orientation for inquiry within this field. As the field of teacher cognition evolved through the 1970s and 1980s, researchers focused on the socio-psychological context within which teachers' actions took place (Borg, 2008). Borg reviews an examination of the field of teacher cognition by Clark (1986) and summarizes Clark's view that "a decade earlier teachers were seen as rational decision-makers, akin to physicians in diagnosing and solving problems; whereas, in 1986 the view of the teacher was more that of the constructivist, reflective 'sense-maker' (Borg, 2008, p. 15). At this point in time, the enthusiasm to explore teacher knowledge was rising and researchers wanted to investigate the notion of a 'knowledge base' for teaching.

In the 1980s there was a move to reform the knowledge base of teachers to improve teaching in the United States. This was predicated on the belief that there was an existing standard to which teaching could be raised to improve the quality of teaching and bring teaching into its own as a respectable, rewarding profession (Shulman, 1987). However, Shulman argued, "the rhetoric regarding the knowledge base ... rarely specifies the character of such knowledge" (1987, p. 4). He further states that

The actions of both policymakers and teacher educators in the past have been consistent with the formulation that teaching requires basic skills,

content knowledge, and general pedagogical skills. Assessment of teachers in most states consist of some combination of basic-skills tests, an examination of competence in subject matter, and observations in the classroom to ensure that certain kinds of general teaching behavior are present. In this manner ... teaching is trivialized, its complexities ignored, and its demands diminished. Teachers themselves have difficulty in articulating what they know and how they know it. (p. 6)

Shulman (1986) argued that exploring only the practical knowledge of teachers was problematic because it did not take into account the important theoretical knowledge that teachers rely on to inform their teaching. Going beyond the dichotomous view of teacher knowledge as either declarative or procedural (practical), Shulman and his colleagues broadened the conceptualization of the knowledge base for teaching into seven categories: subject-matter content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, curricular knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends (1986, 1987). Given the complexity involved in identifying the various components of teacher knowledge, this organizational framework was a valuable contribution that served to broaden the scope of inquiry in the field.

Another significant influence in the research agenda was the work of Donald Schön (1983, 1987), which reinvigorated interest in teacher thinking and in particular, centralized the reflective process in studies of teacher cognition. His seminal work, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), began shifting the field of education away from a view of teachers as individuals who mastered a neatly packaged skill set for systematic application in the classroom. He stressed that teachers actually reflect both *on* and *in* practice in order to ‘reframe’ or better understand what it is they do and why. Similar to research on practical knowledge, work with a reflective orientation investigated teacher

practices to understand how teachers theorize their practice (i.e., connect theory to practical application and real world teaching) by thinking about what they do before, during, and after their classes.

As explorations of teacher cognition proliferated, a focus on teacher beliefs emerged. Pajares (1992) made the most significant contribution in this area with a review of literature on teacher beliefs to show that the construct of beliefs was too diluted in studies to be extracted as a point of inquiry in the field. Pajares deconstructed the idea of teachers' beliefs from a general whole to the specific parts that could more easily be studied, setting an agenda for research that would explore:

Beliefs about confidence to affect students' performance (teacher efficacy), about the nature of knowledge (epistemological beliefs), about causes of teachers' or students' performance (attributions, locus of control, motivation, writing apprehension, math anxiety), about perceptions of self and feelings of self-worth (self-concept, self-esteem), about confidence to perform specific tasks (self-efficacy) [and] educational beliefs about specific subjects or disciplines (reading instruction, the nature of reading, whole language). (Borg, 2008, citing Pajares, 1992, p. 316)

Teacher cognition research continued to burgeon through the 1980s and 1990s and developments in the field resulted in studies exploring a range of topics including subject-matter knowledge, craft knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, practical knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and learning to teach. Verloop, Van Driel and Meijer (2001) note that the overarching label 'teacher knowledge' encompasses various cognitions, including teachers' beliefs, values, and attitudes in complement with factual information, such as subject-matter and pedagogical content knowledge. Ongoing tensions and debates in the field of teacher knowledge center on issues of the relationship between teacher knowledge and learner outcomes, the place of teacher beliefs, values and attitudes in relation to teacher knowledge, and the issue of excessive and overlapping definitions

within the field (e.g., situated knowledge, subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, professional craft knowledge, practical knowledge, personal practical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and many others) (Borg, 2008). However, for the most part, the knowledge base that has been developed on the topic of teacher knowledge supports continued explorations into the rich and complex realm of teacher knowledge.

Following an extensive review of the mainstream educational research on teacher knowledge, Borg (2008) provides a schematic representation of teaching with teacher cognition at the center (see Figure 2.1). It demonstrates the critical role of teacher knowledge in teachers' lives, demonstrating how it is shaped by their early schooling experiences as students and later professional coursework in teacher education programs. It accounts for the impact of contextual factors on the development of their cognitions and highlights the important interactions between teacher knowledge and classroom practice that take place during the reflective process and as they theorize practice.

Researchers have also acknowledged the fact that teachers develop knowledge over time, noting that teachers at varying stages of their careers possess an ever-growing body of knowledge that incorporates different types of interacting knowledge. Snow, Griffin, and Burns (2005) chart knowledge representation at three points of a teacher's career to demonstrate how preservice, novice, and master teachers possess different levels of similar types of knowledge (see Figure 2.2). They outline these different types of knowledge (see Table 2) and propose that knowledge develops over time beginning with a strong foundation in declarative knowledge and moving toward a well-rounded distribution of knowledge with a greater representation of reflective knowledge. They

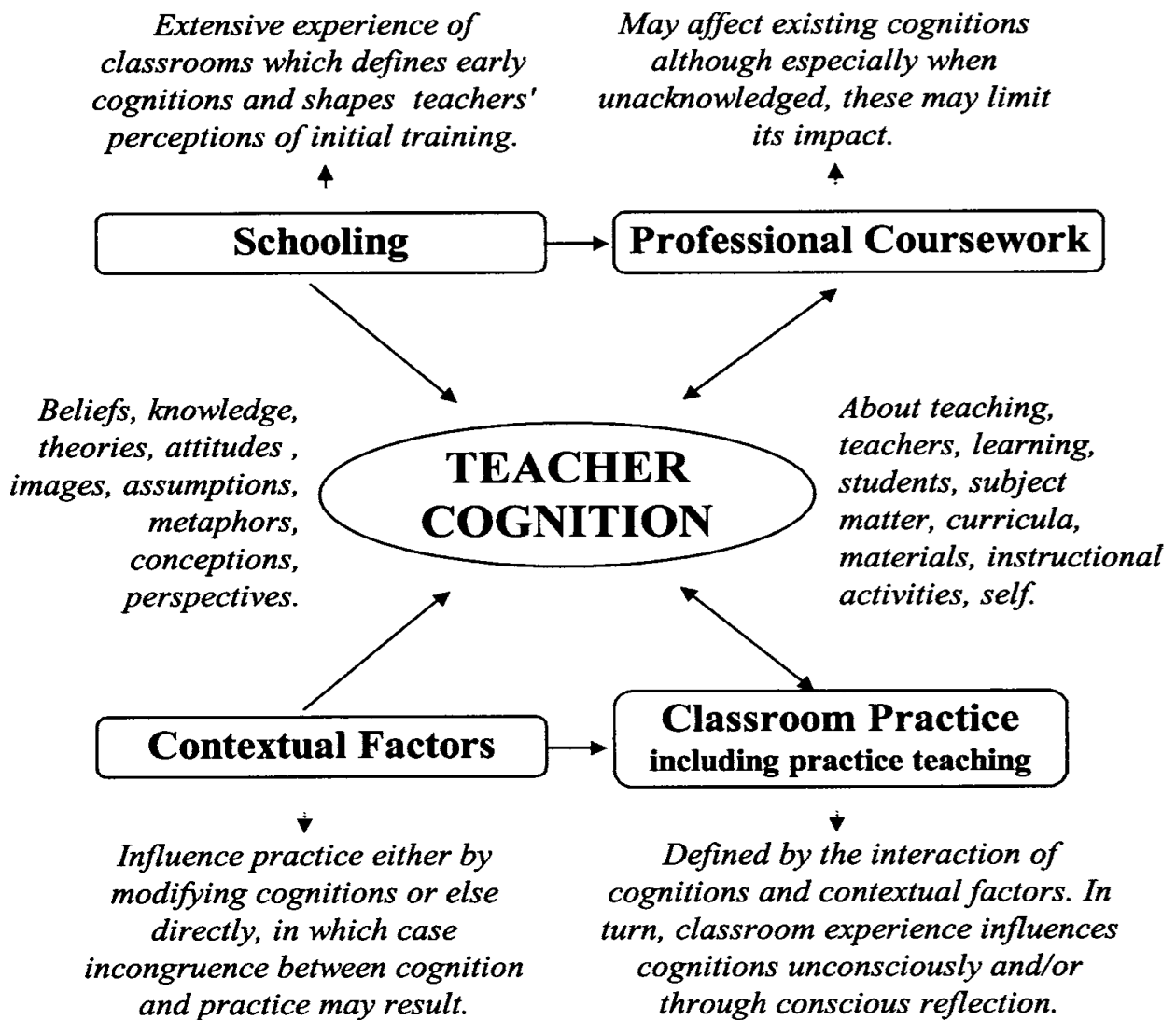


Figure 2.1: Borg's framework for teacher cognition (Borg 1997, 2003).

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stress that these are not meant to be stages of knowledge acquisition but rather a trajectory of knowledge development over time with different types of knowledge overlapping and merging throughout the course of a teacher's career.

Explorations into L2 teacher knowledge surged through the 1990s and into the new millennium, generating a large base of information about teacher knowledge and development from which to build new theories. Many of the investigations parallel those in general education, with theories of teacher knowledge emerging on topics of L2 teachers' decision-making, reflective processes, level of expertise, and the range of types of L2 teacher knowledge. Borg (2008) notes that the range of contexts and concepts explored contribute to a seemingly fragmented perspective of language teacher knowledge. He notes, "these cognitions have been described in terms of *instructional concerns* or *considerations* teacher have, *principles* or *maxims* they are trying to implement, their thinking about different *levels of context*, the *pedagogical knowledge* they possess, their *personal practical knowledge* and their *beliefs*" (p. 87).

Other studies of in-service L2 teachers have explored the relationships and tensions between teachers' cognitions and classroom practices. Some of these studies (Flores, 2001; Richards, Tang, & Ng, 1992) I would argue, are only partially valuable as they consider teachers cognitions in isolation of their classroom practices. Connections were made between teachers' beliefs and a list of factors, such as years of teaching, language learning experience, and professional training. Reported findings, such as the fact that teachers' beliefs and reported classroom practices are consistent with one another can only be taken at face value without actual classroom evidence. Moving

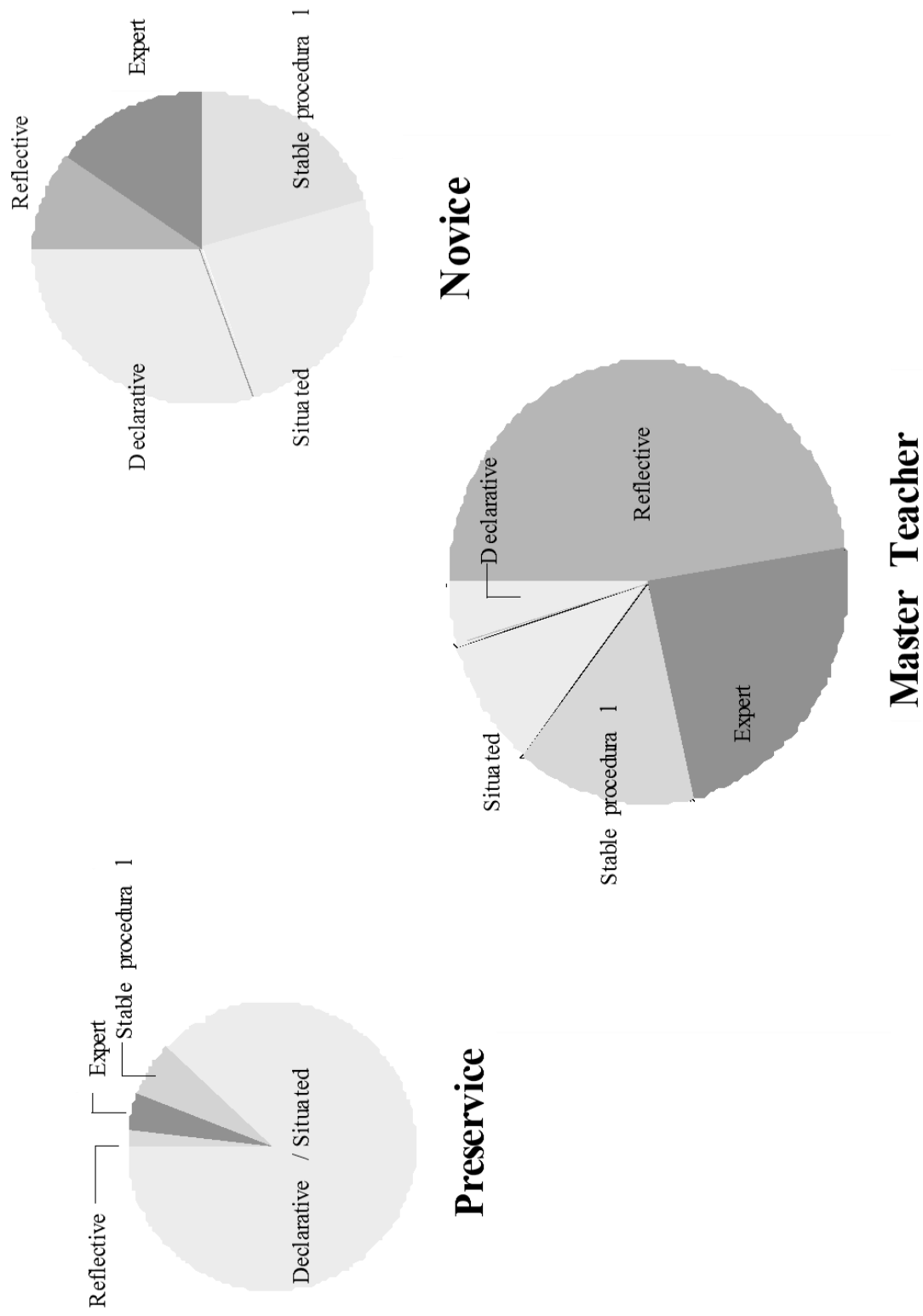


Figure 2.2: Teacher knowledge development throughout career (Snow, et al., 2005, p. 7). Reprinted with permission.

Table 2: Different types of knowledge (Snow, et al., 2005). Reprinted with permission.

Type of Knowledge	Description
Declarative Knowledge	Knowledge gained from books and lectures about what a teacher should do in certain situations; often includes knowledge about child development, instructional strategies, etc. and forms the foundation for novice teacher knowledge.
Situated, Procedural Knowledge	Knowledge that is developed through contact hours in the classroom and is shaped through interactions with learners and other teachers; represents functional knowledge of appropriate behaviors and actions to take in the class, which varies depending on several contextual factors (homogeneity of students, resources, institutional structure, etc.).
Stable Procedural Knowledge	Knowledge of how to rely on declarative knowledge to function effectively in the classroom under 'normal circumstances' such as with students who are mostly at the same level, from the same linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic background.
Expert, Adaptive Knowledge	Knowledge of the experienced teachers who can navigate various instructional challenges, problem solve even in the absence of external support, identify relevant research to support and theorize practice, etc. Teachers with this knowledge should be involved in mentoring and supporting novice teachers, serving in leadership roles and consulting with students who pose particular challenges to their teachers.
Reflective, Organized, Analyzed Knowledge	Knowledge of the master teachers who can evaluate available knowledge from research, books, conferences in terms of their applicability to the learning context in which they work. These teachers should ideally be involved as leaders of professional development opportunities in their department, school and/or district.

studies into the classroom, however, did reveal a connection between teachers' cognitions and classroom practices. Borg (2008) presents a summary of cognitive influences that impact the L2 teachers' classrooms and establishes the following six central themes in research of L2 teachers' cognitions and practices:

- 1) reasons for making instructional decisions (Breen, 1991; Gatbonton, 1999; Nunan, 1992, Bailey, 1996; Woods; 1991, 1996);
- 2) departures from lesson plans (Richards, 1998; Bailey, 1996);
- 3) collective principles and practices (Breen et al., 2001);,
- 4) cognitive change during in-service training (Freeman, 1992, 1993);
- 5) practicing theories of CLT (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999; Mangubhai et al., 2004); and
- 6) narrative studies of teacher cognition (Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Hayes, 2005).

In highlighting these themes, Borg (2008) acknowledges that he is attempting to create a framework from which to consider L2 studies of language teacher cognition. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to dive into these studies; however, I will discuss studies that consider teacher cognitions in relation to teacher experience, as a better understanding of teacher cognitions is pertinent to this study.

Knowledge Studies Based on Teacher Experience

Important contributions to the research on L2 teachers' cognitions have contributed to a better understanding about the role of teacher expertise, through comparing and contrasting the knowledge and dispositions of novice teachers and experienced teachers (Johnson, 2003; Nunan, 1992; Richards, 1998; Richards, Li & Tang, 1998; Tsui, 2003). These findings illuminate the trajectory of teacher knowledge development over time.

Studies of teachers in their first year of teaching reflect the important role that contextual factors play in a novice teacher's ability to access and implement what he or she learned in the language teacher education program. The type of language program in which novice teachers teach determines the extent to which the teachers have freedom to develop curriculum that allow them to exercise the knowledge they are bringing in from their coursework and their practicum experiences. The work of Spada and Massey (1992) relates the experiences of two novice ESL teachers who had starkly differing experiences due to the different settings of their respective schools. On the one hand, the student who took a job in a private school with small class sizes and mostly well behaved students was able to incorporate a variety of activities and instructional strategies from her teacher education program. Another novice teacher in the study was predominantly occupied with classroom management and, therefore, often deviated from his lesson plans to manage student behavior.

In addition to classroom management issues, the sense of obligation to cover a set amount of material in a given school year or semester was found to exert pressure over novice teachers, thus resulting in their divergence from lesson plans and even teaching philosophies. Richards and Pennington (1998) found this to be the case with novice teachers in Hong Kong who abandoned their communicative language teaching strategies in order to move more quickly through the material, blend into the culture of teaching in the school, and bend to the students' preference for traditional approaches to teaching and learning.

Another factor that can steer novice teachers away from using the principles and approaches from their teacher education programs is the clash between the ideal or

‘vision’ of what it will be like with the ‘reality’ he or she ultimately experiences. This vision-reality clash, often cited in both mainstream and language education research as the theory-practice gap, has been documented in L2 studies of preservice language teachers in the L2 practicum who have yet to develop sufficient practical knowledge to link theory and practice in the classroom (Johnson, 1996). Dahlman (2010) explored the perceived theory practice gap in a case study of student teachers to explore the extent to which their underlying beliefs about language teaching and learning shaped their relationship with theory and ability to theorize practice. For novice teachers, the tensions between vision and reality are compounded as a result of workloads far greater than during their practicum, potential lack of collegial support in the school, classroom management issues, and administrative responsibilities added to teaching responsibilities (Farrell, 2003).

An extensive study by Tsui (2003) implemented a case study methodology to trace the development of cognitions and practice of four ESL teachers in Hong Kong. She found that novice teachers evolve greatly over time and after years of teaching, demonstrate an ability to negotiate classroom norms, establish routines, and deliver lessons more effectively than they did in their early years. Her findings include key differences between novice and experienced teachers in their ability to manage and organize learning, maximize resources and class time, motivate students, and establish rapport. She also found that experienced teachers were more adept at theorizing practice through reflection on practice and attempting to make sense of it. Tsui (2003) argues, “in the development of expert teacher knowledge, conscious deliberation and reflection on

experience are central” (p. 259). In her discussion on expert teachers’ ability to theorize practice she cites this apt commentary by Shulman (1988):

Teachers will become better educators when they can begin to have explicit answers for questions, “How do I know what I know? How do I know the reasons for what I do? What do I ask my students to perform or think in particular ways?” The capacity to answer such questions not only lies at the heart of what we mean by becoming skilled as a teacher; it also requires a combining of reflections on practical experience and reflection on theoretical understanding. (p. 260)

In much of the work on experienced teachers, researchers have found that they differ from novice teachers particularly in their practical knowledge. For example, they may be less concerned about students making grammatical errors as long as communication is taking place (Gatbonton, 2008). Drawing on the work of Tsui (2003), Richards and Farrell (2005) list the following characteristics as particular to “expert” (experienced) teachers:

- a rich and elaborate knowledge base,
- ability to integrate and use different kinds of knowledge,
- ability to make intuitive judgments based on past experience,
- desire to investigate and solve a wide range of teaching problems,
- deeper understanding of students’ needs and students’ learning,
- awareness of instructional objectives to support teaching,
- better understanding and use of language learning strategies,
- greater awareness of the learning context,
- greater fluidity and automaticity in teaching, and
- greater efficiency and effectiveness in lesson planning (cited in Rodriguez & McKay, 2010).

Teacher Learning

Teacher learning is considered a domain within teacher cognition that attempts to connect the important psychological and social factors involved in becoming a teacher with the processes involved in learning to teach (e.g., lesson planning, classroom management, mastering subject matter knowledge, examining learner characteristics, etc.) (Borg, 2008; Calderhead, 1988). Viewing teacher learning as a strand of teacher knowledge inquiry has strengthened the connection between teacher knowledge and teacher education (Borg, 2008). Similar to Johnson and Golombek, (2002), I view teacher learning as a reflection of the process that takes place when teachers are developing their teacher cognitions, including their beliefs, attitudes, sense of self, and various types of knowledge. Teacher learning involves the sense making that teachers employ when mapping their knowledge to their practice while continually reflecting on the interactions between them. Teacher learning is not a process that ends with the culmination of a teacher education program or training session but is an on-going endeavor that spans the length of a teacher's career.

Given that the context of the present study is adult education, the ensuing discussion will center on issues related to professional learning by teachers in this context. However, I will first frame the discussion against the backdrop of traditional, university-based teacher education programs for both mainstream and language teachers. The two participants in this study emerged from these cultures of teacher education; therefore, an understanding of these approaches to teacher education is relevant when considering the ways in which the participants theorize practice. I discuss the teacher

preparation and on-going professional development of teachers in the ABE and adult ESL contexts.

Contextualizing Theory and Practice for Pre-Service Teachers

As pre-service teacher learners enter the field of education they may struggle to theorize their practice and find themselves feeling unprepared by their teacher education program for the actual classroom experience. This sentiment is often reflected as the byproduct of a perceived theory-practice gap that is marked by the apparent failure of theory to align with practice, the lack of authority given to teachers' practical knowledge, and the experience of transfer shock by teachers in the classroom during their first year out of the teacher preparation program (Johnson, 1996; Korthagen, 2001). This tension has received a great deal of attention in general teacher education (Cohn, 1981; Korthagen, 2001; Laursen, 2007; Loughran, 2006) and also, to a slightly lesser degree, in L2 teacher education (Bartels, 2002; Dahlman, 2010; Golombek, 1998; McKeon, 1998).

The typical framework for L2 teacher preparation at the university level⁵ is similar to that of general education (theoretical and pedagogical courses followed by a practical component). The theoretical basis of the coursework often includes linguistics courses in second language acquisition theory (SLA), syntax, phonology, and pragmatics. These may be followed by a selection of the following: L2 methodology (required), curriculum development, program management, discourse analysis, L2 research design, language testing (L2 assessment), cross-cultural communication and pedagogical

⁵ In this paper, university level L2 teacher education generally refers to programs of study resulting in any of the following: TESOL Certificate, ESL endorsement and BA/MA TESOL. The described framework of a program refers specifically to a complete program, which would result in a BA or MA Linguistics with a TESOL emphasis.

grammar.⁶ Following these courses, teacher-learners participate in a language teaching practicum where they are placed in a language classroom to work closely with an experienced cooperating (mentor) teacher (Bailey, 2006; Tomaš, Farrelly & Haslam, 2008).

During the practicum, the expectation is that theoretical and pedagogical knowledge will be put into practice. The effectiveness of the practicum has been questioned in light of the myriad variables that can impact a practicum experience, including levels of feedback from the mentor teacher, opportunities for accessing mentor teachers' practical knowledge (Tomaš et al., 2008; Zanting, Verloop & Vermont, 2003), opportunities for reflection on lessons, and the relationship between the mentor teachers and the university supervisors of the practicum (Hascher, Cocard & Moser, 2004; Smedly, 2001). In addition, mentor teachers may not be trained to act as teacher-learner supervisors, may not give teacher-learners the freedom to experiment with new approaches, and may not see the concepts that the teacher-learner brings to the class as relevant or fitting (Bailey, 2006). More research on the effectiveness of the practicum course to enhance teacher-learners' abilities to incorporate theoretical and pedagogical knowledge is urgently needed. However, while concerns about the effectiveness of the practicum exist, it is arguable that factors in the structuring of the practical component play a role (e.g., choice of cooperating institution, choice of mentor teacher, length of the practicum, etc.). Experience with the practice of teaching and the interactions in the classroom are widely viewed as integral components to teacher preparation. "The problems of practice must emerge and be explained in the experiences of practice so that

⁶ This list is not exhaustive, but is a representative sample of many programs (Richards, 1987; Tedick & Walker, 1994) from the 1980 and 1990s.

both students and teachers of teaching together can examine the tacit aspects of teaching” (Loughran, 2006, p.38). Unfortunately, leaving the practicum course until the end of the program results in limited access to the notion of practice and, therefore, presents conceptual challenges when students are asked to theorize their practice.

Language teacher preparation often depends too heavily on using methods that are separated from their theoretical underpinnings and from the context for which they are most appropriate (Tedick & Walker, 1994). Methods are often presented in a vacuum and methodology courses are treated like a “pedagogical catch-all” for teacher preparation programs, with an emphasis on a selection of particular accepted approaches (e.g., the Natural Approach or Structured Input/Output) (Tedick & Walker, 1994, p. 307). In a best-case scenario, theory may be tied into the methods course at the surface level with an introduction to prominent theories such as Comprehensible Input, Schema Theory, Interaction Hypothesis, and Noticing. Given that many programs have only one methods course, there is a lot of pressure on the instructors of this course to cover many theories. Course designers, assuming the goal is to impart expert knowledge to the teacher-learners, often decide which theories to teach prior to meeting their students. In this way, course design takes place without consideration of teacher-learners’ previous teaching and learning experiences or the teaching contexts in which they have been or will be working (Johnson 1996; Korthagen, 2001).

Honoring and Building Upon Teachers’ Existing Knowledge

Teacher educators must take into consideration the various types of knowledge that teacher-learners will need to be successful in their respective contexts and provide them

with the tools for theorizing practice in an effort to make obsolete the perception of a theory-practice gap. In considering what type of knowledge is integral within the context of language teacher education, Freeman and Johnson (1998) propose a reconceptualization of the knowledge base. It is now widely acknowledged in both general and language teacher education programs that practicing teachers and the professional knowledge they possess are the cornerstone to improving teaching and, thereby, teacher preparation programs (Burton, 2000; Clarke, 1994; Gore & Gitlin, 2004). Additionally, teacher-learners' prior knowledge and beliefs should not be extracted from the teacher preparation process (Burns, 1996; Gatbonton, 2008; Tsui, 2003). Rather than solely transmitting 'expert' knowledge and educational theory, teacher educators should focus on the ongoing development of practical knowledge and highlight the existing knowledge that teacher-learners have available to them through prior educational experiences.

Approaches to teacher education to augment the teacher-learner's ability to theorize practice, should incorporate reflection and provide opportunities for teacher-learners to experiment with theory construction by exploring the interpersonal, curricular, and methodological interactions in actual classroom practice (Prahbu, 1990). Along these lines, Richards and Nunan (1989) call for a move toward experience-based theory building, which would rely on an examination of the various relationships and interactions present in the classroom as evidenced through the interplay among teachers, students, materials, assessment, and instructional strategies.

In an attempt to better understand the role of teachers' cognitions during interactions with theory, Dahlman (2010) notes that "teachers' reluctance to use theoretical

knowledge arises during the process of interpretation” during which they attempt to draw connections between the theory and their existing practical and personal knowledge, as well as their beliefs (p. 39). Given that teachers’ classroom practices are shaped by teachers beliefs about teaching and learning (Johnson, 1999, 1994) and beliefs about knowledge (Woods, 1996), Dahlman set out to explore the extent to which knowledge and beliefs further impacted their ability to theorize practice.

Her multiple case study of three student teachers revealed an interplay between teachers’ cognitions about theory and their ability to access the theory and connect it to their practice. The three student teachers varied in the extent to which they related to the theoretical knowledge and found it useful to them. One student teacher showed relative ease with the analysis and synthesis of theoretical knowledge, finding complimentary relationships between said knowledge and her practical knowledge. Another student teacher also interacted positively with the theoretical knowledge and could cite sources and theories to fit situations; however, she had a more ‘affective’ relationship with the theory and approached classroom practice more from ‘what feels right’ rather than what the theory would predicate in this situation. Finally, the third grappled with theoretical knowledge and believed that the best way for a teacher to develop was to simply spend time in the classroom. Her use of theoretical knowledge was functional and served to provide her with ideas for classroom activities.

This study presents an interesting perspective on the perceived theory-practice gap in language teacher education and provides insight as to how this gap may in fact exist at the level of interpretation. The interactions of these three teachers with theoretical knowledge “raises an interesting question, namely whether teachers who do not seem to

engage with theory analytically can be taught to engage with it in more analytical ways”

(Dahlman, 2010, p. 70). Dahlman proposes three ways in which language teacher education programs can “support teachers’ engagement in the higher-level cognitive processes during interpretation of new information” (p. 71). In brief, she suggests:

1) promoting reflective practice so that teachers can tie theory to their practice regularly and consider the relevance in doing so; 2) cultivating a sense of unity among all components in a teacher education program such that teachers value both theoretical courses and practical experiences on an equal level as mutually inclusive of one another; and, 3) acknowledging that a teacher’s ability to interact with theory through “higher-level cognitive processing during interpretation” is not guarantee that she will make use of the theory in practice (72). In this case, teacher educators should ensure that the theory not only makes sense to teachers but also relates to their personal practical knowledge and lived experiences. In sum, Dahlman promotes encouraging teachers to “take an active role as consumers of theoretical knowledge” while at the same time suggesting that teacher educators embrace the opportunity to positively shape the views teachers hold regarding theoretical knowledge (p. 72).

If teacher educators accept the value of teachers’ knowledge in teacher development, teacher education programs must be reformulated to integrate and balance theory (conceptual knowledge) and practice (practical knowledge) (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Korthagen, 2001; Laursen, 2007). In addition, programs should actively promote honoring the importance of teachers’ practical professional knowledge (Gore & Gitlin, 2004) and give more credence to the beliefs, assumptions and values that they bring to the teacher education experience. Freeman and Johnson (1998) argue that “for the

purposes of educating teachers, any theory of SLA, any classroom methodology, or any description of ... English language as content must be understood against the backdrop of teachers' professional lives, within the settings where they work and within the circumstances of that work" (p. 405).

For teacher learners who are not currently practicing, teacher educators must provide opportunities to develop critical skills for theorizing practice. Connecting theory to a context for reflection can be provided through the provision of classroom case studies, videos of actual teaching and of course, sustained opportunities to cooperate with a mentor teacher in the classroom, not only at the end of the program during the final practicum, but throughout the program. "When students predict, criticize, and analyze their mentor's teaching, they start to 'theorize practice'. This is the starting point for connecting theory to reality" (Zanting, et al., 2003, p. 200). They will tap into this 'theorizing practice' skill set regularly throughout their careers as they move through various teaching contexts, encounter diverse learner populations, attempt to explore emerging theories on teaching and learning and all the while, attempt to find their voice and shape their identity as teachers.

Community-Based Adult Education - Framing the Context

Adult education programs (e.g., Adult Basic Education (ABE)⁷ and adult ESL programs) offer classes to both native English speakers and ELLs to help them achieve

⁷ Presently, research on L2 teacher preparation for work with adults is often embedded within the context of Adult Basic Education (ABE). Relevant research and theories related to ABE are a rich source of information about the field of adult ESL instruction and teacher professionalization because adult ESL and ABE are often housed together. From here on, it is implied that reference to ABE includes adult ELLs in the discussion.

goals related to literacy, job skills, family, transportation, and further education (Young, 2009). In the case of ELLs, relevant life skills classes offer the content through which oral and literacy skills in English are developed. Entities that provide adult literacy and ESL services include "...local educational agencies, institutions of higher education, community-based organizations, libraries, public or private nonprofits, public housing authorities, correctional agencies, family literacy providers, or consortia of for-profit agencies" (Sabatini, Ginsburg, & Russell, 2002, p.19). There are many challenges faced by these service providers, but perhaps the most dominating challenge, which exacerbates all others, is securing funding for programs and staff (see Sabatini, et al., 2002 for a discussion of funding issues, stakeholders and consequences of accountability for ABE.). The growing demand to professionalize the field of ABE in the face of limited funds presents a conundrum for these organizations, yet, they persevere with the strength of dedicated program administrators, staff, and teachers who are all committed to providing educational services to adults within their communities.

The changing learner profiles of adults acquiring ESL and literacy skills has resulted in an increase in students who have little to no formal education experience and in many recent cases (e.g., certain newly arrived refugee populations), no first language literacy skills to build upon when acquiring English oral and literacy skills (Young, 2009). Critical to successful teaching with adult ELLs who have experienced interrupted formal schooling or for whom no formal schooling was available is an understanding of background information that may impact their learning, such as formal education experience, native language literacy level, religious and cultural issues, war-related trauma, gender-based expectations related to education, goals and motivation for learning

English, length of time in the US, and a number of personal issues related to their resettlement agency, such as job placement and family, housing, and transportation issues (Young, 2009). This partial list of issues that ELLs must deal with is representative of only a few that a teacher needs to know about. Being able to solve such a wide range of issues requires high levels of creativity and sensitivity. Teachers with strong formal educational backgrounds and decades of experience with print literacy can scarcely relate to the issues that many adult emergent literacy learners face, yet it is imperative that teachers attempt to at least try their best to make sense of it all. They can do so through prolonged and meaningful exchanges with learners, engagement with the emerging research within this context, collaborations with peers and mentors in the field, and continued involvement in context specific professional learning opportunities that support sustained development.

Themes that emerge from the literature related to the theory-practice gap in ABE and adult ESL center on issues related to the professionalization⁸ of the field. Among these issues are concerns about the thoroughness of teacher preparation, the availability of on-going teacher development, and the need for credentialing teachers.

Professionalization of teachers within the domains of ABE and adult ESL has received significant attention in the last decade (Crandall 1994; Sabatini, et, al., 2002; Schaetzel, Peyton & Burt, 2007). Professionalization can be defined as “the movement in any field toward some standards of educational preparation and competency” (Sabatini, et al., 2002, p. 2). Within the field of ABE a move toward professionalization of adult literacy practitioners is of particular interest with consensus in the field being that some level of

⁸ Professionalization is often the term used to encompass teacher education, teacher training, teacher development, and teacher preparation in discussions on ABE and adult ESL teachers.

teacher standards and certification is needed. Research confirms that teachers are a huge determiner of learner outcomes; thus, it is imperative that professionalization in the field of adult ESL and literacy teaching become a priority for all stake holders (policy makers, program administrators, funding agencies, teachers, learners, and researchers) (Carey, 2004; Haycock, 1998; Smith & Gillespie, 2007). Currently, the absence of clear standards for teachers working in this context impacts the level to which teachers are carefully selected and adequately prepared to teach adult ELLs.

Many practicing teachers in community-based ABE and adult ESL programs are part-time employees or volunteers with varying educational backgrounds and a range of ESL teaching and cross-cultural experience. They usually do not have contracts or benefits accompanying their teaching positions (Crandall, 1994; Schaetzel, et al., 2007; Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Young, 2009). Young provides recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Education regarding the employment status of teachers within ABE. For the 2004 - 2005 program year, 49% were part-time employees, 35% were volunteers, and 15% were full-time paid teachers. Some are newly trained preservice teachers, who want the adult education experience. Others are retired or former teachers with a K-12 background who may or may not have specific training for work with adult ELLs (or adults in general). Many are not specifically trained to teach literacy; for some, the teacher preparation opportunities provided by the community-based organizations are the only teacher preparation they receive (Crandall, 1994; Smith & Gillespie, 2007). There are numerous issues related to policy and funding that factor into these statistics; it is not the case that programs selectively hire inexperienced teachers.

Recently, the Center on Advancement of Adult Literacy released an extensive report on credentialing of teachers in adult education (see Smith & Gomez, 2011). In this report, they review the importance of credentialing and certification, discuss standards that should be in place, review teacher preparation in state and university programs, provide an overview of requirements by each state and argue for the gains from increased professionalization of the field. One of the most striking findings presented in this report was a table (Smith & Gomez, 2011, pp. 16-18) presenting the requirements from state to state for adult education practitioners and additional requirements by each state for ESL certification. Of particular note, 18 states have no mandated degree or credential in place for working with adults and 38 states have no preservice ESL credential requirements, although some states require endorsement within a certain timeframe after being hired. Additionally, Smith and Gomez (2011) note,

In the states that *require* adult education teachers to get in-service certification, qualifying for certification seldom demands very much of a teacher. It often means attending a short new teacher orientation or 10-15 hours of other professional development each year, activities undertaken by many teachers in other states with no certification benefit. It is ironic that volunteer tutors may enter into an adult education teaching situation with more training than a paid teacher. (p. 18)

Of course, failure of some state policies to promote critical professionalization of the field does not mean that all programs in those states accept the status quo. In fact, many programs establish their own credential and professional development requirements for pre-service and in-service teachers alike.

Volunteers have been key players in general adult education for many years, dating back to large-scale federally funded literacy movements in the 60s and 70s (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005). Volunteers come to the task of adult literacy education with

the best of intentions, grounded in humanitarian interests and a desire to contribute to improved literacy levels nationwide. Traditionally, volunteers work in one-on-one pairings as private tutors; however, with the rapid increase in the ELL population, the demand for teachers is moving some programs to entrust small classes to volunteers. Heavy reliance on volunteers in adult literacy has been questioned with some educators arguing that they should only operate as assistants to qualified teachers (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005). This criticism stems from the fact that volunteer teacher preparation and previous experience is often limited and may be insufficient given the task at hand. Research investigating volunteer literacy teachers' practices indicates that they infrequently employ effective instructional strategies for teaching reading, often rely on their own learning experiences to inform their practices, and, even after a training course, may resort to their original ways of teaching (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005).

Community-based approaches to language teacher preparation are generally very brief and characterized by an over-reliance on 'tips and tricks' and best practices, often with little consideration for the relevant theoretical underpinnings (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005; Smith & Gillespie, 2007). Approaches to teacher preparation differ from program to program, but most entail an initial training (ranging from 8-18 hours in surveyed programs). Given the insufficiency of this preparation, it is not surprising that teachers "still feel underprepared, have a sense of isolation once they begin their tutoring and suffer from retention problems" (Sandlin & St. Clair, 2005, p.133). On the upside, the strength of community-based teacher preparation is the extent to which teacher learning is contextualized (Schaetzel, et al., 2007). This is because the preparation of teachers is often conducted by the program itself and is, therefore, closely guided by the profiles of

the actual learners they serve. In addition, in-service teachers and tutors for respective programs can be invited to present their practical ideas in these trainings.

Nonetheless, short one-shot orientations cannot establish the knowledge base needed for working with adult ELLs. As evidenced in Table 2.2, requirements for credentialing and certification are minimal nationwide, and, therefore, there is no incentive for programs to prioritize teacher preparation or professional development. Additionally, given oppressive budgetary restrictions, many programs simply do the best they can with limited resources and hope that the teachers will also do their best. The critical agenda for educating teachers in adult ESL programs lies in establishing sustainable, community-driven approaches to professional learning.

Knowledge Base for Teaching Adult Emergent Readers

Inseparable from the discussion of professional learning and professionalization in the field of adult ESL are the theories fundamental to the knowledge base for teaching adult emergent readers. An extensive list of widely accepted practices grounded in second language acquisition theory is available as a resource for teachers of adult ELLs who are L1 literate (e.g., jigsaw and instant expert activities). However, when considering theories directly applicable to teaching adult emergent readers, the research base is minimal. Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) is an international organization dedicated to conducting and sharing empirical research on L2 acquisition by adolescent and adult emergent readers. During the keynote address at

the LESLLA symposium in Minnesota, the presenters held up the two SLA ‘bibles’⁹ of over 900 pages each, noting that neither contained a single theory based on work done with adult emergent readers. The research agenda has been set in motion and studies are leading to theories of oral language processing and the impact of literacy on language acquisition (Bigelow, delMas, Hansen, & Tarone, 2006; Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Tarone & Bigelow, 2005a; Tarone & Bigelow, 2005b). As this field of inquiry grows, so will its place in the handbooks of SLA and in teacher education programs.

Additional insights for teaching reading to adult ELLs are grounded in the research on teaching L1 literacy to both children and adults. This body of research provides a starting point for testing theories and designing approaches for work with L2 adult emergent readers. A critical contribution from this field, for example, is the list of five components identified in the literature as integral to the development of literacy: phonological awareness, phonics, orthographic awareness, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension (Kruidenier, 2002; Burt, Peyton & Schaetzel, 2008). Burt, et al. (2008) acknowledge that the research base on instructional strategies for working with L2 adult emergent readers is scant. However, they list the following strategies grounded in SLA theory, reading research, and general learning theory, as useful in addressing the above-mentioned four key components for literacy development:

- build on and develop learner motivation;
- build on learners’ knowledge and experiences;
- provide a real-world context for literacy activities in class;

⁹ The two SLA ‘bibles’ were *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition* (Doughty & Long, 2003) and *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* (Ellis, 1994). Of note, *The Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (Hinkel, 2005) does briefly address issues of L2 literacy in an early section of the book.

- teach specific strategies for approaching and understanding passages;
- teach word recognition skills and alphabetic literacy;
- build vocabulary;
- create opportunities for peer-to-peer communication about written texts;
- consider direct feedback, rather than teacher recasts, to help learners acquire correct grammatical forms; and
- involve learners' family members in literacy activities (pp. 3-5).

A continued effort is required by all engaged teachers and researchers invested in teaching ELLs with emerging literacy to continue exploring and contributing to the knowledge base of the field. As the research base grows and is informed by practice and strengthened through theory testing, efforts to professionalize the field will continue to pick up momentum.

Promoting Professional Learning for Practicing Teachers in Adult Education

Clearly, teacher education programs and community-based approaches for teacher preparation are only the beginning, and it is well beyond the capacity of these efforts to do more than provide an initial foundation upon which to continue building. As teachers transition into their careers, develop their identities as practitioners, and increase their knowledge base, it is imperative that they are given ample opportunities for professional development through on-going teacher learning. Britzman (2003) honors the challenges faced by mainstream teachers, which mirror those of language teachers across contexts. They all bring their own stories and trajectories of teacher learning to the teaching experience. She explores the 'struggle for voice' that teachers undergo as they face the

unexpected tensions of the teaching profession. She notes, “teachers are confronted with a difficult existential truth about education rarely discussed and, more often than not, actively avoided: trying to teach is deeply unsettling and conflictive because experience itself - ... ‘practice’ - is a paradox, an unanticipated social relation, and a problem of interpretation” (p. 3). As teachers embark into their new professional world, their take on the theories and propositions from their teacher education programs will continue to grow and morph alongside their practice, through their interactions and in negotiating the contradictions they encounter in their professional reality. As we move into a discussion of the situated practices and professional learning of in-service teachers, it becomes apparent that theorizing practice is at the heart of what teachers should be doing, and, therefore, providing support to do so is a paramount responsibility of program directors.

A team of researchers working with literacy volunteers found that they value support from trainers and staff within the organizations as much as they value materials and teaching resources (Cook, Dooley & Fuller, 1994). Programs have attempted to respond to the needs of tutors by increasing the frequency of in-service trainings and providing on-line forums for sharing classroom activities and lesson plans, information on the cultural backgrounders on learners, and practical ideas for classroom management. However, these approaches are still limited in scope and fail to provide teachers with a sense of belonging within a community of practice. Effective professional development should promote sustained and ongoing opportunities for professional learning (see the Appendix for additional professional development resources).

When considering the best approaches to professional development for teachers in general and teachers of adult ELLs in particular, it is widely accepted that they should be

collaborative and teacher-directed. Johnson (2009) promotes an inquiry-based approach to professional development that gives teachers the chance to interact with both theory and practice. In fact, she promotes abandoning this dichotomy altogether to embrace the more “fluid construct of praxis” (Johnson, 2009; Freire, 1970). Further supporting inquiry-based professional development, Sharky (2010) says,

Teacher knowledge is generated in inquiry and is facilitated by learning communities. Teacher learning involves teachers and others engaged in critical inquiry into their experiences, beliefs and assumptions, as well as policies and practices in schools and communities. (p.135)

According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) the aim is to “ultimately alter practice and social relationships in order to bring about fundamental change in classrooms, schools, districts, programs, and professional organizations” (p .272). Johnson (2009) adds that situating professional development in communities of practice is in keeping with a sociocultural perspective because peers can scaffold one another’s learning. In the next section I will review a few options for professional development that rely on community, inquiry and relevance to teachers’ contexts.

Models of Inquiry-Based, Teacher-Directed Professional Learning

Study circles aim to link practice and theory. They are comprised of “a group of practitioners reading and discussing research and considering its implications for classroom and program practice” (Burt, et al., 2008, p.6). Study circles can also be implemented as a follow-up to workshops as a means of processing the content, reflecting on theory and discussing suggested methodological approaches. As a tool for ongoing professional learning they contribute to developing a community of practice within a program or region. The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

(NCSALL) promotes study circles as an opportunity for teachers to read relevant research related to adult education, discuss the findings in relation to their teaching context, design and subsequently implement approaches for applying the research-based findings in their classrooms (NCSALL, 2006).

Mentoring, coaching, and peer observations are useful approaches that allow novice and expert teachers to draw from the practices of one another in order expand upon their practical and pedagogical knowledge base for teaching adult ELLs. The goal is stimulating conversation about teaching practices, sharing insights on the learners, and engaging in the reflective process (Burt, et al., 2008). Serving as a mentor or coach to new teachers is a great approach for reinvigorating experienced teachers who might be experiencing burnout (Richards and Farrell, 2005). Also, as noted previously, the ability of a teacher to access a mentor teacher's practical professional knowledge will contribute to a greater understanding of the cognitive processes that take place and why a mentor teacher chooses certain approaches or teaching styles (Zanting, et al., 2003).

Lesson Study (Takemura & Shimizu, 1993) is another fruitful approach to professional learning that stands out for its direct application to the context of the teachers. A community of practice working with lesson study chooses a particular content area or class to focus on. Together, they collectively develop a lesson based around research, shared knowledge, the experience of those involved, and innovative practices they would like to implement. Once the lesson has been designed, a teacher elects to pilot the lesson with his or her class, allowing others in the group to observe in person or videotape for later reflection. Johnson (2009) recommends that observers be trained to look for particular aspects of the instructional practices that both focus on the teacher and

the students. Following implementation, the teachers discuss the lesson and feedback from both observers and the acting teacher.

Supporting Teachers as Professional Learners

Sustained professional learning opportunities need the support of the administration because they require time and resources for implementation. Program administrators are responsible for myriad duties including grant writing, hiring and training teachers and staff, ensuring that student intake and assessment runs efficiently and that program evaluation takes place, and, in some cases, designing and implementing teacher preparation workshops and evaluations (Christison & Stoller, 2012; Young, 2009). Program administrators are the driving force behind the success of community-based adult education, an acknowledgement that brings with it both praise and criticism. In a study of ABE and adult ESL teachers, Smith and Hofer (2003) surveyed participants about their professional development experiences. Teachers indicated concerns about infrequent observations, insufficient feedback on their practices, and limited support from program administration. While program administrators are not expected to fulfill all their administrative duties and fully partake in teacher education, they should have a hand in the professional development of their teachers (Soppelsa, 1997).

Additionally, while program administrators cannot be expected to know everything that is relevant to adult ESL teaching and learning there are certain theories that should be accessible to administrators as they support teachers' professional learning and determine the best course of action toward professionalization. Young (2009) suggests that certain underlying theories should form a minimum knowledge base for

program administrators. Her suggestion includes knowing relevant reading research on adult ELLs, seeking guidance on multilevel instruction, gaining information on teaching speaking and listening skills, and having access to instructional and assessment resources for ESL teaching.

Perhaps one of the most generous contributions a program administrator can provide for the professional development of teachers is time. The unfortunate reality is that many programs are severely limited financially and, thus, cannot often provide contract positions with benefits. At the minimum, however, they should attempt to provide valued time for teachers to collaborate with one another. In a study on how adult education teachers changed over time, Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon and Rowe (2003) found that the most significant factors at the institutional level were teachers' access to benefits and preparation time. Succeeding these factors slightly in significance, but still emerging as important determiners of change, were teachers' access to paid professional development time and opportunities for collaboration with peers.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide an overview of the literature encompassing research on teacher cognitions and teacher learning in both mainstream and language teacher education to frame this study on teacher development for work with adult emergent readers. Teacher education and preparation at both university-based and community-based levels are discussed to provide background on the experiences that have shaped the teacher knowledge of the two ESL teachers in this study. The importance

of ongoing teacher learning is emphasized as an essential component in the development of teachers and models for professional learning.

CHAPTER 3

ACTIVITY THEORY

This study is influenced by the sociocultural perspective of human learning and, therefore, embraces the epistemological stance that cognitive development can only be explored and understood in relation to the context, culture, and communities within which the development takes place (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). This perspective also takes into account that all human action is mediated through the use of cultural artifacts and tools. The present study explores teachers' situated practices and investigates how they use and develop their knowledge bases as tools for mediating activity and negotiating meaning in the classroom and within the larger macro structures that comprise their teaching context. As such, a sociocultural perspective seems fitting. Johnson (2009) posits, "a sociocultural perspective on human learning transforms how we understand teacher learning, language, language teaching, and the enterprise of L2 teacher education" (p. 2). She further discusses the shift in recent decades from a positivist, scientific method approach in educational research to one that embraces the interpretive perspective. She states,

Rather than attempting to predict what teachers do or should do, interpretative research is interested in uncovering what they already know and are able to do, and how they make sense of their work within the contexts in which they teach. In that sense, interpretative research focuses on what teachers know, honors what they know, and helps to clarify and resolve the dilemmas they face. (p. 9)

The sociocultural perspective considers the prime unit of analysis to be mediated action with the focus of research being the individuals carrying out the activities (Wertsch, 1995). While the present study does explore the situated practice (i.e., the mediated action) of ESL teachers of adult emergent readers (i.e., the individuals), I have chosen to broaden the perspective through the use of activity theory as an analytical tool and conceptual framework. Activity theory allows for richer conceptualizations of individual experiences, acknowledging that human activity takes place in collective practice, communities, and institutions and, therefore, is shaped and influenced by multiple viewpoints, relationships, tensions, and histories.

Activity theory originated in sociocultural theory through the early work in the 1920s and 1930s by Vygotsky (1978), Leont'ev (1981) and Luria (1976). In the following section, I will discuss of the evolution of activity theory, beginning with a review of the foundational work by Vygotsky and Leont'ev. Next I will introduce the reformulations of early theories into the contemporary model of activity theory and its five key principles (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1987, 1991, 1999).

Foundations of Activity Theory

Activity theory is a theoretical framework that can be applied to analyze and make sense of human practices within a given culture and context. Human practices or actions are revealed through their interactions with their environment and explored through the basic unit of 'activity' or 'what people do' (Engestrom, 1987, 1991, 1999; Kuuti, 1996). Activity theory is often viewed as an evolved theory with contemporary variants grounded in the early work of Lev Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky posits that

humans interact with their environment through the use of tools and cultural artifacts that mediate efforts to achieve certain goals or objectives. As we strive toward our goals, we are transformed and develop as individuals within a society and culture (Cross & Gearon, 2004; Engeström, 1987; Leont'ev, 1978; Scribner, 1985). This notion has come to be known as the mediational model, which Vygotsky (1981) diagrammed using a triangle to show the association between a stimuli (S) and response (R) as mediated through the use of a tool (X) (see Figure 3.1).

The mediational model stresses that the interactions between humans and goals are not direct, but rather require the mediation of tools. His work centered on the higher psychic functions of children as they communicated with adults, using tools such as signs and early formulations of language to help them successfully convey a message or be understood. Vygotsky's theory placed a great emphasis on the mediational tools involved but did not address the notion of activity. His student, A.N. Leont'ev (1978) saw this exclusion of activity from a theory of mediation to be problematic. He expanded upon Vygotsky's theory to incorporate human activity and the interactions within practical activity, which arguably influence the choice of mediational tools.

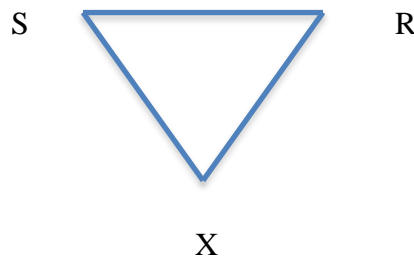


Figure 3.1: The mediational model (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 40). Reprinted with permission.

Leont'ev viewed all activity as being comprised of actions carried out by a subject through the use of tools, which result in particular operations aimed at a certain goal or motive, represented as the object (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Lektorsky, 2009).

Leont'ev's conception of activity is depicted in Figure 3.2. To give an example from education, the teacher (subject) uses a Think-Pair-Share exercise (tool) in order to help her students achieve certain learning objectives (object).

Key to this theory is the idea that activity is carried out within a given context and the ability for the subject to reach his or her goal is determined by the availability of necessary tools or the ability of the subject to effectively realize the tools in order to mediate actions within the activity system.

The Significant History of Activity Theory

The actual history of the development of activity theory is significant because it has given activity theory its power as a catalytic research tool. As noted above, activity theory is grounded in the early work of several Russian psychologists. It is best appreciated against the political backdrop that shaped it in Soviet Russia during the early 20th century. Sannino, Daniels and Gutierrez (2009) provide an excellent overview of the history of activity theory, which was overshadowed by the societal turmoil experienced by its primary founders, Vygotsky, Luria, and Leont'ev, during the Russian Revolution.

Activity → Motive

Action → Goal

Operation → Conditions

Figure 3.2: The structure of human activity

Included in this history is the practice turn by scholars, which can be attributed to Marx's notion of revolutionary practice wherein "theory is not only meant to analyze and explain the world, but also to facilitate practices and promote changes" (p. 3). Many activity theorists have incorporated a practice orientation in their work over the past eight decades through interventionist research (i.e., research that identifies new tools and suggests changing existing approaches within a given activity).

Early examples of interventionist research include, the educational impact of Vygotsky's work with homeless children, the impact on healthcare of Luria's neuropsychological work with patients who suffered head trauma, and the societal impact of Leont'ev's work with injured soldiers (Sannino, et al., 2009). The propensity toward transformation and innovation in theoretical work associated with activity theory is deeply rooted in this history.

Activity theory is one that develops as an integral part of the historical turmoil in which activity theorists live. Perhaps today's movements advocating global justice, the rights of ethnic minorities, and ecological sustainability will be the ground for the next generation of activity theorists. The identity of activity theory stands on the ability of those who work within this framework to establish fruitful connections between the classic heritage of the theory, present societal challenges, and orientations toward the future. (Sannino, et al., 2009, p. 11)

During the student movements of the 1960s, the foundational tenets of activity theory reached the rest of Europe and began to be explored by progressive academics and researchers in the United States. Sannino, Daniels and Gutierrez (2009) argue for the legitimacy of activity theory. They state,

As a unified theory, activity theory has shown consistent viability throughout its history, beginning in the 1930s when Leont'ev formulated its basic principles and proposed the structure of activity. In addition, activity theory today attracts more interest globally than ever before. The term 'unified' does not refer to a closed and fixed theory. However, it rules out an interpretation of activity theory as an eclectic grouping of multiple theories. (p. 1)

In particular, the activist work of Yrjo Engeström and his colleagues in Finland moved activity theory from a little-known theory to a tool for research that promotes changing societal practices (Sannino, et al., 2009). The contributions to activity theory by Engeström will be discussed in the next section.

The Evolution of Activity Theory with Engeström

Engeström viewed early versions of activity theory as lacking the potential to represent actions as elements of a collective activity system (Engeström, 1999). He envisioned a model of activity theory would account for the historicity, multiple perspectives, and interactions and offer potential for development inherent to collective activity. Activity theory, according to Engeström (2001) can best be summarized through an explanation of five key principles. The five principles to be extrapolated here are: 1) the prime unit of analysis is a collective object-oriented activity system mediated through the use of tools; 2) activity systems are multivoiced; 3) activity systems have historicity; 4) contradictions are central to transformation and development; 5) long term expansive cycles of transformation are possible in activity systems. As a result of Engeström's work in redefining activity theory, it is now commonly applied to the study and analysis of organizations, institutions, businesses, educational entities, and other activity systems to identify the potential for transformations in the collective practice. In the next section, I will expand upon each of the five key principles to provide further support for the choice of activity system as an ideal analytical tool for the present study.

Activity System as Prime Unit of Analysis

The first principle specifies that in order for an activity theoretical analysis to take place, a specific object-oriented activity system must be the prime unit of analysis. He notes that the minimum elements for an activity system must include subject, object, mediating tools, rules, community and division of labor (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1987). These are represented in what is referred to as Engeström's triangles (see Figure 3.3). Engeström (2001) notes, "goal-directed individual and group actions, as well as automatic operations, are relatively independent but subordinate units of analysis, eventually understandable only when interpreted against the background of entire activity systems" (p. 136). In the present study, analyzing the entire activity system of each participant allows for a more comprehensive view of reality as framed by the various relationships, interactions and tensions present.

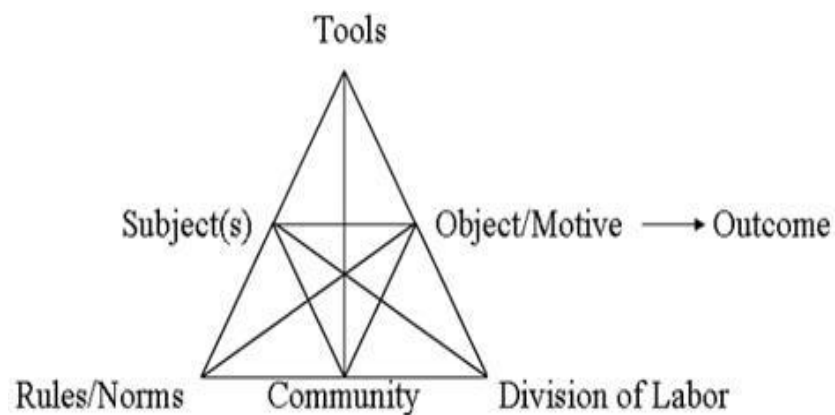


Figure 3.3: Engeström's Triangles (Engeström, 1987, p.78). Reprinted with permission.

In an activity system, the *subject*¹⁰ is the doer of the action or the actor in the activity system. Analysis of the activity system takes place from the point of view of this individual or group. In other words, given the activity system of a language classroom, if the analysis is exploring what the teacher does in the classroom, the teacher would be the subject (e.g. Kim, 2011). However, if the focus of the analysis is investigating the way in which language learners use a new instructional tool for learning, such as computers, the learners would be the subject (e.g., Blin, 2005).

The *object* of the activity system can be conceived of as that which the activity system is acting upon or toward which it is directed. By extension, there is an *outcome* component in the activity system that is generally conceived of as the goal (motive) of the activity system. As the activity acts upon the object, the aim is transformation of or within that object such that the outcome is reached.

The *tools* are integral in the transformation of the object toward reaching the outcome. They are constructed and transmitted as per the cultural norms and cognitive forms that created them (Blin, 2005). They may be physical or material, such as textbooks and handouts; however, they may also include psychological or cognitive artifacts, such as language, beliefs, knowledge, and procedures. Tools either help or hinder the subject in carrying out the actions, depending on their availability, their usefulness for certain applications or their effect on the interactions between the subject and object.

¹⁰ The use of the term ‘subject’ in this study will always be in reference to that component of the activity system. While the participants in this study are the ‘subject’ of their respective activity systems, I will not refer to them as *subjects* in the experimental research sense. However, I will refer to ‘subject’ in discussions of the interactions among activity system components. To the extent possible, I will refer to Sofia and Nancy Ann by name or as participants.

The *community* within an activity system includes anyone who participates in the environment of the activity system and has an interest in the outcome. As noted by Cross and Gearon (2004) “community situates activity within a wider context by recognizing that it only has meaning as part of a larger social setting” (p. 10).

The *division of labor* within the activity system refers to the distribution of tasks and power within the activity system, which may be horizontal or vertical. Horizontal divisions of labor may be exemplified by the work of teachers working with learners at a similar level within the same program. Vertical divisions of labor are often related to power and status and may be reflected in the relationships between teachers and administrators in a program (e.g., Roth & Tobin, 2002). The division of labor acknowledges that different members of the community contribute to the goal in distinct, but important ways; each has an impact, direct and indirect, on the actions within the activity system.

The *rules* refer to the norms, conventions and expectations, both implicit and explicit that are prevalent in the activity system. The rules constrain the actions and interactions within the activity system and determine the extent to which certain tools can be used toward the outcome. The community creates the rules based on expectations of acceptable behavior within the activity system.

Multi-Voicedness

The *second principle* of activity theory highlights the multi-voicedness of activity systems. This recognition of “multiple points of view, traditions and interests” stems from the awareness that all activity is collective and, therefore, inherently involves a

community rich with variety and even tensions (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). An activity system incorporates the voices, expectations, traditions, beliefs, histories, and so much more as inseparable components of the individuals and groups involved in the activity system. In an educational setting, those components will be reflected in the actions and interactions carried out by teachers, students, administrators, stakeholders, and the students' family members. No classroom, teacher, or group of students exists in a vacuum sheltered from these various influences

The division of labor in an activity creates different positions for the participants, the participants carry their own diverse histories, and the activity system itself carries multiple players and strands of history engraved in its artifacts, rules and conventions. The multi-voicedness ... is a source of trouble and a source of innovation, demanding actions of translation and negotiation. (Engeström, 2001, p. 136)

Activity theory makes paramount an effort to create a space in which these influences and perspectives can make noise and be recognized, thus promoting the expansive learning that will be addressed as principle five.

Historicity

The third principle of activity theory is historicity. In addition to the multiple perspectives and realities that are brought into an activity system by its participants is the vast history that shapes each activity system over time. It is only against the backdrop of this history that an activity system with its various “problems and potentials” can be fully understood (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). The historicity of an educational activity system takes into account the local history of policy making, program development, cycles of power shifting with the coming and going of administrators and teachers, curricular decision making, professional development for teachers and of course the ever-evolving

learner profiles of incoming refugee and immigrant populations. In this light, the civil wars in Burundi, Sudan, and Somalia can be considered part of the history of an English language program that now serves adult emergent readers from those regions.

Contradictions

The fourth principle of activity theory is the essential function of contradictions as catalysts for transformation within the activity system. “Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” that can lead to both conflicts and innovations (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). They arise with the evolution of an activity system and the resultant interactions among components within the activity system. For example, they may occur with the introduction of a more advanced tool to the activity system, such as technology in the classroom, which *initially* may complicate the activity or limit the capacity of teachers or students to carry out tasks.

Contradictions are a critical tenet to activity theory and their centrality speaks to the inherent nature of conflict, contradiction, and tension in human activity. In his review of activity theory, Kuutti (1996) explains,

Activity theory uses the term contradiction to indicate a misfit within elements, between them, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity. Contradictions manifest themselves as problems, ruptures, breakdowns, and clashes. Activity theory sees contradiction as sources of development; activities are virtually always in the process of working through contradictions. (p. 34)

The opportunities for development that exist when contradictions are identified support the notion that they do not reflect failure in a system and should not be seen as obstacles or signs of weakness. Rather, they can be seen as the “illuminative hinges through which participants in an activity can reflect on their activity system’s developmental trajectory

and understand its dynamics” (Foot, 2001, p. 12). It is the power of activity theory to acknowledge the dynamic nature of activity systems that makes this analytical tool idyllic for the present study. Engeström identifies and explains four levels of contradiction within an activity system. They are represented in the triangle model by a lightening bolt between the elements experiencing the tension. The next section delineates the levels at which contradictions can occur within an activity system. Identifying contradictions at each level outlined below serves as the basis for analysis of the activity systems in this dissertation.

A level one or *primary* contradiction is that which occurs within a single component of the activity system. It is akin to an internal conflict and may occur when an individual in the system, for example, has to take on a dual role or is coerced into taking a particular stance on an issue that is in contrast to his or her epistemology. For example, Kim (2011) used an activity theoretical approach to study L2 teaching practices by an EFL teacher in South Korea. Kim discovered that the subject of the activity system, a Korean EFL teacher, had a striking primary contradiction because her classroom practices appeared to be at odds with her beliefs about teaching language structures. In this study, the teacher employed communicative activities in the classroom but attested to her belief that certain structures should be learned mechanically and repetitively. Addressing primary contradictions requires a level of reflection and introspection that will promote evaluation of practices and ultimately, a shift toward new approaches that move the activity system to a culturally more advanced version of itself with appropriate object-oriented actions.

A level two or *secondary* contradiction is a tension that arises within a

relationship between two elements or components of the activity system, such as subject and tool, subject and community or community and rules as they interact. An example of this contradiction uncovered in the aforementioned study (Kim, 2011) was that between subject (the EFL instructor) and community (her students). The instructor included communicative activities in her class but they were not always received well by the students in her class who viewed these activities as irrelevant for their success on the high stakes national exams. Relationships throughout the activity system will naturally entail tensions at some point. Negotiating these tensions requires a level of relational agency, which is the “capacity to work with others to expand the object that one is working on and trying to transform by recognizing, examining, and working with the resources that others bring to bear as they interpret and respond to the object” (Edwards, 2009, pp. 208-209). Through employing relational agency to resolve contradictions between components in the activity system, participants in the activity tap into the distributed intelligence and expertise available in the system.

A level three or *tertiary* contradiction occurs between the activity system and a more advanced or further developed version of the central activity (Engeström, 1987). I would argue that ‘more advanced’ is perhaps an unfair judgment that automatically puts one version of the central activity system in a place of inferiority to another, but at the same time it does acknowledge that activity systems evolve over time and often at different rates from one another. An example of a tertiary contradiction in a language classroom might emerge if a new technology or approach is introduced into the language teaching activity, resulting in tensions within the system (Blin, 2005). For example, if a language teacher wishes to introduce the use of technology into the classroom but the

students resist the use of this new tool, there will potentially be breakdowns in the system that the teacher and students will have to address.

A level four or *quaternary* contradiction occurs between two neighboring and interacting activity systems that share an interest in the same object and outcome. No activity system exists in isolation from other activity systems. In fact, all activity systems are engaged in a process of development and transformation that hinges on one another. For example, the activity system of a community-based language program may experience tensions resulting from interactions with the activity system embodied by the state level entities that determine assessment policies and funding for the language program. This level of contradiction is the focus of much recent work by Engeström in what is termed the third generation of activity theory. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to thoroughly explore additional activity systems as they interact with those I have analyzed; however, it is noted as a critical future direction for this study, the importance of which will be explained in Chapter 7.

Expansive Cycles

The fifth principle of activity theory “proclaims the possibility of expansive transformations in activity systems” (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). It is perhaps the most critical principle according to Engeström, who views transformation and expansive learning to be the goal of this practice-based, historical and future-oriented theory. Engeström has asserted throughout his work on developing activity theory that “it is essential that researchers not rest content merely to pass their research findings back to those who are affected by them, but that they remain active in helping to turn new ideas

in to practices” (Blackler, 2009, p.34). The identification of contradictions and attempts to reformulate the “raw material” of the object is what leads to the potential expansive learning. Engeström (2001) acknowledges that expansive learning is an iterative process.

Activity systems move through relatively long cycles of qualitative transformations. As the contradictions of an activity system are aggravated, some individual participants begin to question and deviate from its established norm. In some cases, this escalates into collaborative envisioning and a deliberate collective change effort. An expansive transformation is accomplished when the object and [outcome] of the activity are reconceptualized to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity. (p. 137)

To some degree, activity theory as a framework is ideally suited as a tool for empowerment. In considering the complicated history of the founders of activity theory and the societal challenges they faced during their time, it is no surprise that Engeström (1999) wrote, “activity theory has the conceptual and methodological potential to be a pathbreaker in studies that help humans gain control over their own artifacts and, thus, over their future” (p.29). In choosing an activity theoretical framework, researchers should be committed to challenging societal and cultural norms, shifting perceptions, addressing contradictions, and facilitating dialogues that target expansive learning.

Activity Theory in Educational Research Settings

Activity theory has been applied in several domains to explore activity systems and identify opportunities for growth and transformation. It has been used as a transformative tool to reconceptualized teacher education and professional development (see e.g., Roth & Tobin, 2002; Tasker, 2011; Tsui, 2007). Researchers have employed activity theory to make sense of teachers’ classroom practices (see, e.g., Ahn, 2011; Kim, 2011) and to evaluate the impact of instruction on learning (see, e.g., Yamazumi, 2009). I

will briefly discuss two studies to demonstrate how activity theory has been applied to the educational setting. The first presents an activity theoretical approach to examining the use of ‘lesson study’ as a tool for mediating the learning of EFL teacher learners in the Czech Republic. The second study uncovers the tensions explored in the activity system of an EFL teacher in Korea to set the stage for the current study of ESL teachers.

*Lesson Study as Mediatlional Space for EFL Teacher
Development in Czech Republic*

Lesson study (Fernandez & Yoshida, 2004; Takemura & Shimizu, 1993) is an approach to professional development that promotes teacher collaboration in an effort to target student learning. Tasker (2011) explored the use of lesson study in the Czech Republic by three EFL teachers working in a large private school. The study traced the expansive transformation of the teachers’ activity systems. The dominant contradiction being addressed was that between the two activity systems as characterized by a mismatch between the expectations of teachers for student use of English outside of class and the students’ actual use of English, resulting in frustration among teachers and a perception that students were not making progress in English.

The study, which spanned 14 weeks, began with initial interviews of the teachers to establish components of the activity system and identify central tensions. Over the course of several meetings, the researcher was actively involved in the lesson study as a facilitator to monitor teachers’ contributions and identify critical incidents. Critical incidents are used in Developmental Work Research (Engeström, 1999, 2007), which is often employed within an activity theoretical framework to create a mediational space for participants and researchers to reshape practices. In this study, Tasker identified emotive

comments by the participants as critical incidents and used them to bring teachers' attention to the contradictions at hand.

As they worked together to analyze these incidents, they began a cycle of expansive learning centering on their collective articulation of an overarching goal. They moved from sentiments of frustration over what the students were not doing to a stance on what the students could take responsibility for, namely their learning. From that point, they were able to jointly construct activities that would serve as a revised instructional tool for the activity system, giving voice and choice to the students and thereby promoting their investment and involvement with English outside of class. Through the lesson study, the teachers were able to modify their conceptualization of student responsibility for learning and do something with this new perspective. This study demonstrated that as the teachers generated their own theories, tested them in the classroom, and expanded upon them with colleagues, they ultimately transformed their practice. This research both speaks to the useful role of lesson study for professional development and activity theory as a transformative research tool.

Negotiating Curricular Reform in Korea

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been a prominent approach to language teaching throughout the world over the past two decades. CLT is an approach to language teaching grounded in the notion that classroom interaction promotes language learning and should therefore be implemented by language programs. In Korea, the Ministry of Education embraced CLT and designated it as the core of English language curriculum in secondary schools. In addition, to this curricular reform, they have put into

place a Teaching English Through English (TEE) policy which mandates that English language classes be taught solely in English. Not surprisingly, this reform has had quite an impact on teachers in Korea. Kim (2011) employed an activity theoretical approach to investigating to what extent CLT and TEE impacts teachers through the case study of Hee-Won, a Korean in-service teacher. Kim sought to understand how Hee-Won “has constructed her perceptions of and practices within these curricular mandates and, at the same time, how these same perceptions and practices serve to construct the contexts from which they have been derived” (p. 225). Her analysis uncovered numerous contradictions within Hee-Won’s activity system, highlighting the complex relationship between policy and those it impacts.

In modeling the activity system, Kim identified the following three objects in Hee-Won’s activity system: 1) covering the text; 2) preparing her students to pass school exams; and 3) maintaining students’ motivation. Several rules and tools served to mediate the activity of Hee-Won’s system, but her interactions with them manifested primary, secondary, and tertiary contradictions. Kim uncovered a key internal conflict (primary contradiction) caused by discord between the communicative approach to language teaching and Hee-Won’s beliefs about how language should be learned. On the one hand, she believed students needed more opportunities to practice in English, but on the other hand, most of her lessons were teacher-centered, and she supported mechanical practice. Secondary contradictions were present at multiple layers of her activity system reflecting many tensions. I will list a few to show the impact of curricular reform on this teacher: 1) conflicts between teacher and student attitudes toward CLT; 2) teacher’s inability to use text communicatively; and, 3) inability to draw correlations between communicative

activities and discrete, textbook-based exam items. Finally, a key contradiction was that between Hee-Won's activity system and the TEE policy set forth by the government. This contradiction was particularly impactful on her because she lacked confidence in her English because it was not native-like. In fact, Kim found that Hee-Won only used English occasionally, such as when reading from the text. During interactions with students, she spoke Korean.

Applying the activity theory lens for a closer look into a teacher's classroom practice allowed Kim to identify significant factors impacting instructional practice, and in the case where practice has not been impacted, the study reveals 'violations' of a government policy. As Kim notes, this study "provides valuable insights for those involved in curriculum reform. In this study, the beliefs of the teacher contradicted the mandates of the Ministry of Education, and the teacher was left to determine how to deal with those contradictions" (p. 236). Kim acknowledges that this study reflects the experience of one individual, but she suggests that a more holistic picture of the impact of curricular reform could be revealed through the experiences of individuals working within various affected contexts. The bottom line in this study is that curricular reform is complicated and situating teacher practice to understand the impact is crucial.

Activity Theory to Explore Teacher Knowledge and Practice

These studies demonstrate the effectiveness of activity theory a conceptual framework and analytical tool for educational research. For this dissertation, in particular, activity theory is ideal because it promotes context-embedded inquiry, transformation and researcher involvement. This approach encouraged me to go beyond situated teacher

practice to seek out and identify relationships and tensions within the larger system in order to recognize opportunities for transformation. As Cross (2004) states,

‘Teaching’ has no meaning in and by itself, and there is no ‘one teacher’ that has sole authority over absolutely everything related to the act of teaching. Teachers, their work (goal, activities) and how they do their work is derived from where they are situated within a wider social, cultural and historical context. (p. 34)

Activity theory allows for a holistic view of the situation being explored, making context paramount to the inquiry, thus aligning with the epistemology of the interpretivist research paradigm. “Human life is fundamentally rooted in participation in human activities that are oriented toward objects. Thus, human beings are seen as situated in a collective life perspective, in which they are driven by purposes that lie beyond a particular goal” (Sannino, et al., 2009, pp. 2-3). Exploring the human activity of the teachers and learners within the greater context of the school demands an approach that allows for this ‘collective life perspective.’

Additionally, it operates from the standpoint that research should be transformational, not only transactional. In other words, research should involve the participants and ultimately give back to the community in a meaningful way (Engeström, 1999). This particular study was born from my interests in teacher education and teacher practice with specific relation to the teaching and learning of L2 adult emergent readers. As noted in Chapter 2, there are many challenges that face teachers of these learners, not the least of which is a feeling that they are unprepared for this teaching context and at times unsupported in their professional growth.

Through my personal teaching experiences in various community-based ESL programs, as well as my conversations with teachers in these contexts, I recognized that there were not only issues related to teacher preparation, professional development, and

resource availability, but there was an often unspoken power differential between classroom teachers and other entities, such as program administrators and researchers. At the outset of this study, my hope was to be able to make better sense of the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of teachers’ classroom practices. However, early in the research process, I realized that this study would go beyond simple observations and reports; it would additionally take that information and move forward to embrace and promote change in systems and empowerment of teachers. Activity theory is a practice-based theory that urges deep involvement of the researcher in the activity of the participants. The power in this study, therefore, is the selection of activity theory as the theoretical framework.

Operationalizing Activity Theory

As reviewed above, various researchers working in diverse contexts have employed activity theory; however, there has been little consistency in applications and interpretations of the framework. In fact, activity theory has been criticized for its lack of a standardized methodology for implementation (Mwanza, 2001; Nardi, 1996). In an effort to address this criticism, Mwanza (2001) demonstrates an effort to operationalize activity theory through the creation of a methodology that centers on an Eight-Step Model for examining human activity. It was developed during a project, which analyzed work practices in order to inform the design of a computer system as an improved tool to mediate the activity in the workplace. Her approach provides a way to systematically use activity theory to guide research and has subsequently been applied by other activity theorists. As the present study uses this methodology, I will extrapolate the basic tenets of her approach.

The activity theory methodology includes six stages for applying this framework. Within these stages, the Eight Step Model is activated at Stage One. It will be expanded upon below. First, the six stages are the following:

- 1) Model the situation being examined (using the Eight-Step Model).
- 2) Produce an Activity System of the situation.
- 3) Decompose the situation's Activity System.
- 4) Generate research questions.
- 5) Conduct a detailed investigation.
- 6) Interpret findings.

The present study passed through each of the six stages of this methodology; however, it did not happen in a linear fashion. For example, formulating the research questions (stage four) occurred prior to modeling the situation and, subsequently, to producing and decomposing the activity system. I had determined what I wanted to investigate before deciding that activity theory was the most appropriate analytical tool for the inquiry. However, the research questions did evolve as the activity system was produced and decomposed. In addition, there were many questions that were generated based on this methodology (i.e., guiding questions in the Eight-Step Model) that did not serve as core research questions but rather as tools for data collection and analysis. Another deviation from the linear nature of these stages involved Stages Five and Six. While preliminary interpretations could be made about the components of the activity system prior to investigation, data collection and preliminary analysis were necessary to generate an accurate model of the situation and produce a representative activity system. For example, I could not determine the object and outcome of the activity system without

some initial observational and interview data to ascertain the perspective of the ‘subject’ in relation to those components.

The methodology is best understood when implemented and will, therefore, be illuminated in Chapter 4 of this dissertation when I expand on its application in this study. However, it is useful for this discussion to present the Eight-Step Model here. It consists of eight open ended questions that target the components of the activity system so that they can be mapped onto the triangle (i.e., subject, object, tools, rules, division of labor, community) to represent the activity system. The questions are:

- 1) *Activity of Interest*
 - a. What sort of activity am I interested in?
- 2) *Object or Objective of activity*
 - a. Why is this activity taking place?
- 3) *Subjects in this activity*
 - a. Who is involved in carrying out this activity?
- 4) *Tools mediation the activity*
 - a. By what means are the subjects carrying out this activity?
- 5) *Rules and regulations mediating the activity*
 - a. Are there any cultural norms, rules, or regulations governing the performance of this activity?
- 6) *Division of labour mediating the activity*
 - a. Who is responsible for what, when carrying out this activity, and how are the roles organised?
- 7) *Community in which activity is conducted*

- a. What is the environment in which this activity is carried out?
- 8) What is the desired *Outcome* of the activity?

(Mwanza, 2001; italics and British spelling in original¹¹)

The knowledge produced from answering these questions is the raw material for building the activity system based on Engeström's (1987) triangle model (Figure 3.3). Mwanza (2001) suggests breaking down the larger triangle into manageable chunks or 'sub-activity triangles' for analysis. She provides an Activity Notation (see Table 3.1) and three 'rules-of-thumb' to facilitate this process. According to Mwanza, "the rules-of-thumb state that each combination within the activity notation shall consist of:

- 1) An 'Actor' represented by the *Subject* or *Community* component of the triangle model.
- 2) A 'Mediator' represented by the *Tools*, *Rules* or *Division of Labour* component of the triangle.
- 3) The '*Object*' on which activity is focused."

Given the complexity of the larger activity system, identifying sub-activity units, clears the path for a coherent analysis of the interplay among components. For example, investigation can focus on the relationship between the *subject* and the *object* as mediated by the *rules*. The research questions that Mwanza's methodology suggests arise from this sub-activity matrix and include such questions as: *What Tools does the Subject use to achieve the Objective and how? What Rules affect the way the Subject achieves the Objective and how?* These questions did, in fact, serve in the data analysis as a tool for exploring relationships and uncovering contradictions.

¹¹ Future citations from Mwanza (2001) will also employ her italics and British spelling, but I will only make note of it here.

Table 3.1: Activity Notation (Mwanza, 2001). Reprinted with permission.

Actors (Doers)		Mediator		Objective (Purpose)
Subjects	~	Tools	~	Object
Subjects	~	Rules	~	Object
Subjects	~	Division of Labour	~	Object
Community	~	Tools	~	Object
Community	~	Rules	~	Object
Community	~	Division of Labour	~	Object

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of activity theory, which serves as the conceptual framework of this qualitative study. The principles set forth for activity theoretical investigations underscore the value of this analytical tool in promoting qualitative change and development within human activity systems. The next chapter will discuss the larger analytical framework for this descriptive case study.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology of the study, which aims to explore the day-to-day practices of L2 teachers of adult emergent readers, investigate their practical knowledge and make sense of how they use this knowledge in the classroom and in their professional development. The specific research questions are:

1. What characterizes the classroom practices of L2 teachers of adult emergent readers?
2. What constitutes the teacher knowledge of L2 teachers of adult emergent readers?
3. What context-dependent relationships and tensions shape this knowledge?
4. In what ways can a better understanding of these classroom practices and context-dependent relationships and tensions inform professional development and policy with relation to this context?

In this chapter I will first present the design and rationale for this ethnographic multiple-case study. I then employ rich, thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009) to present the context of the study and introduce the participants, Sofia and Nancy Ann. Data collection and analysis is framed through a discussion of qualitative practices appropriate for case study methodology, as well as principles for conducting an inquiry guided by the theoretical framework of activity theory. Important to the rigor of this study, I expound upon the measures I took to ensure trustworthiness

and discuss at length my role in this study as it relates to my epistemological and ontological views as a researcher. Finally, I review important ethical considerations taken into account to protect my participants and others who were indirectly involved or associated with this study.

Design and Rationale

This qualitative research entails a descriptive multiple-case study guided by the interpretivist philosophy and conducted within a constructivist paradigm (Hatch; 2002; Yin, 2003). According to the interpretivist philosophy, we cannot separate ourselves from that which we know. Furthermore, knowledge is created and negotiated through our social interactions and our lived experiences. The constructivist research paradigm naturally compliments the interpretivist philosophy. Hatch (2002) describes the constructivist paradigm as one that assumes “a world in which universal, absolute realities are unknowable” and that “multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage points” (p. 15). Epistemology or the theory of knowledge pertains to the study of the nature and scope of human knowledge, including how this knowledge is related to or affected by beliefs, values and notions of truth. Epistemologically, the constructivist paradigm subscribes to the notion that knowledge is subjective and is constructed by the knower and to better explore the knowledge, the researcher and participants should work closely to create meaning together (Hatch, 2002). Furthermore, research within this paradigm investigates phenomena in the natural setting through the use of qualitative methods for data collection and analysis.

In keeping with the ontology and epistemology of this paradigm, this research generated a descriptive multiple-case study. Hancock and Algozzine (2006) define case study as an “intensive analysis and description of a single unit or system bound in space and time” (p.10-11). The bounded unit to be studied in each case in this multicase research study is an ESL teacher of adult emergent readers in a community-based language program. The study explores the nature of the teachers’ practical knowledge and how they access and develop that knowledge during and outside of classroom practice. I chose the case study design because it allows for an exploration of a given phenomenon in its natural context without needing to manipulate the behavior of the participants. According to Merriam (2005), a case study is a justified approach when the variables are so embedded in the situation that observing the actual context is the most robust approach for a better understanding of the phenomenon in question. In addition, Yin (2003) defines case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). In the present study, observing the teachers in the classroom and school setting was essential to create a representative and fair description of teachers’ actual classroom practice. The context also informed my perceptions and interpretations of the interview data, leading to a more complete understanding of the role of teachers’ practical knowledge and beliefs in shaping their classroom practice. In addition, a qualitative approach provides a more complete picture of the institutional challenges they faced than would otherwise have been obtained through questionnaires or surveys alone, which would have removed me from the context.

The multiple-case design in this study increased the capacity to make sense of this multifaceted teaching context and provided more opportunities for practitioners in similar settings to decide if the findings are applicable to them. As noted by Stake (1981), case study knowledge can be more concrete and contextual and importantly, is often shaped by the readers. In other words, readers of the research bring with them their experiences with particular populations in mind. Based on this background knowledge, they read the study for its applicability to their particular contexts, gleaning from it what is meaningful to them. The two cases in this study varied with regard to student population, teacher resources, teacher education, and on-site teacher support and supervision. However, each case is representative of typical models of adult community based language programs. Discovering similar themes (i.e., relationships and tensions) in the cross-case analysis increased the likelihood of transferability of findings to similar settings, thereby generating more powerful insights than would have been possible in a single-case design (Yin, 2003).

The analytic tool and conceptual framework employed within this multi-case study is activity theory. As noted in Chapter 3, activity theory allows the researcher to construct a holistic view of human behavior and human interaction within a given context or activity system. Activity theory was chosen as an effective tool for capturing the complexities of this context wherein the teacher is not operating in isolation but is rather navigating a social world in which her activities, choices, behaviors and knowledge are shaped by those with whom she interacts, including students, other teachers, and administrators. Initially, I planned to focus primarily on the teachers through an investigation of instructional strategies targeting literacy development. However, the

richness of the situation called for an analytic tool that allowed me to go beyond instructional strategies in the classroom to address the important mediating relationships within the larger context, such as those among teachers, students, administrators, rules, and divisions of labor that ultimately impact classroom practices and teacher development. The aim was not to prove a hypothesis through experimental research, but rather to generate knowledge about L2 teachers' actual classroom practices in light of the development of their practical teacher knowledge and as supported by opportunities for professional development.

Context

For this multiple-case study, there were two sites for data collection. While the epistemology of community-based research allows for full disclosure of research partners, such as site or program names, the confidentiality of the participants in this study calls for the use of pseudonyms for both the participants and the sites for data collection. With this in mind, the following are the pseudonyms used for the sites in this study: *Bright Future Academy* and *Global Partnership Program*. These two programs are representative of two typical adult education program models. They reflect common differences across programs in their approaches to program management, teacher and staff recruitment, teacher training, credentialing, student population, class sizes, and curriculum mapping. I chose to explore two distinct contexts to increase the likelihood that readers will be able to relate this study to their own context. I will describe each in detail to give the full picture of the context for this study.

The Bright Future Academy

The Bright Future Academy (BFA) exists within a large school district in Utah. It is an open entry program for adults with immigrant and refugee status. There is a minimal annual fee for enrollment, but this includes courses offered throughout the academic year. The students in the program come from dozens of countries representing even more native languages. The program is supported by state and federal funding, as are other school programs within the district, such as the elementary and high schools. In addition, the school receives additional support for certain programming through a partnership funded by grants awarded to the Department of Workforce Services.

The facilities and resources are state of the art, which is often not the case in community-based adult education programs, which can be situated in apartment complexes, community centers, churches or even the learners' homes. The program administrator shared in a conversation that they feel very lucky to be housed in such a fine building with vast resources and a prime location. Upon entering the school, you see shiny white floors, new lockers along the light brick walls, and a large main office, which is on display behind glass walls. As you walk down the hallway and glance into the classrooms, you will see brand new audiovisual equipment, new whiteboards, long tables, and chairs spaced out in large rooms with carpet. The walls are adorned with maps of Utah, the U.S., and the World, as well as posters depicting the alphabet, numbers, phonological rules, and other educational graphics. There are file cabinets stocked with materials, such as texts, paper, pencils, scissors, and more. In one of the rooms, there is an impressive new computer lab with at least 20 computers for use by students taking classes in the adult education program.

Between class periods, when the halls fill with adult learners, you can see the wide range and large number of students served by this program. Lining up for the cafeteria at lunchtime are men and women of various backgrounds. Having had numerous interactions with the local refugee and immigrant populations in the area, I could identify students by region on my first visit. I spotted students from Burma (both Karen and Burmese Muslim), Bhutan, Somalia, Sudan, Burundi, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and various countries in Latin America. I later met students from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central Africa Republic, and Eritrea, and even more countries are represented in this program.

The teachers in this program appear to have many resources at their disposal. As noted above, every classroom is new with updated equipment, including large whiteboards, dry erase markers, small whiteboards for individual student use, AV equipment for projecting visuals from laptops, overhead projectors, file cabinets, and enough text books for each student in the class to have one copy. With the exception of tracking attendance, administrative duties are not the responsibility of the teachers at the BFA but are carried out by the staff in the main office. These include completing the intakes on new students, assessing students' English language proficiency levels, registering students for classes, and assigning students to particular teachers. Teachers are supposed to verify students' placement scores upon entry into classes to make sure they were assigned to the correct level. Teachers assess their students through in-class measures to track student progress; however, the determining factor for student advancement from one class to the next lies in student scores on the standardized test

measures, which for the BFA is the standardized assessment provided by Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS).¹²

One important source of funding for the BFA is the Department of Workforce Services (DWS). The involvement of the DWS in this program has both positive and negative impacts on student attendance. On the one hand, students are required to attend for a certain number of hours per week in order to receive support from DWS. For this reason, on the days they attend, they go to three or four classes per day, arrive on time and stay for the entire class, in order to retain benefits. On the other hand, because the primary goal of DWS is to ensure that these immigrant and refugee populations acquire jobs, they are additionally required to actively seek employment every week. This means that they often have to miss classes to attend job interviews or job training sessions. As a result, most students only come 3 days a week and spend the other days seeking employment. Of course, this presents notable challenges to the teachers, which will be discussed later.

The Global Partnership Program

The Global Partnership Program (GPP) is one of several programs functioning within a nonprofit organization that connects the University with communities on the west side of the city and is located in an apartment complex, which houses predominantly

¹² CASAS (www.casas.org) is a nonprofit organization that develops assessment and curricula for programs providing basic skills training in youth and adult programs. They provide one of two predominant standardized tests available for adult ESL programs to use as a measure of level placement and tracking student progress. The BEST test is the other commonly used assessment (www.cal.org/aea). A discussion of assessment (choice, implementation, tracking, etc.) is included in the section on findings in this dissertation.

lower income families, many of whom are individuals with immigrant and refugee status. Each of the programs within the nonprofit comprises a three-way partnership including the nonprofit entity, a community partner (or partners) and a University partner. The GPP is physically located within an apartment complex and the recipients of the services offered through the GPP are the residents of the complex, who comprise a diverse population. One of the services provided by the GPP is free English language programming for residents who do not speak English as their native language. The structure of the GPP English language program has changed since this study was conducted, so I will describe it as it was then and note the changes.

Originally, the three-way partnership of the English language program at the GPP included an academic department at the University, a community partner, which I will refer to as the English Language Support Program (ELSP) and the GPP. From the University department, the team included a supervising associate professor and two graduate students in the doctoral program, who were specializing in second language teacher education. As the partnership strengthened, this team grew to include students in the TESOL program at the University who served as student teachers at the GPP. These students held a unique position in the partnership because in addition to serving as student teachers from the University, they were additionally trained and monitored by the ELSP as volunteers. The ELSP team included the program director, an AmeriCorps Vista volunteer serving as a program manager, and the ELSP volunteers, including the TESOL students. Finally, the GPP team was made up of the program director of the GPP and a member of the Resident Committee, which was a group of individuals chosen to represent the communities at the GPP. For some of the meetings, the assistant director of

the GPP and/or the director of the nonprofit entity were present. For the most part, the GPP team served as a facilitator of the meetings, creating agendas for the meeting, keeping notes, and mediating if conflicts in decision-making arose. The bulk of the decisions about curriculum, scheduling, assessment, material selection, and resource allocation were made by the community and University partners, as they were the English language specialists in the partnership.

At the time this study was conceptualized, I was one of two doctoral students working on site at the GPP. This position served as my teaching assistantship and was funded by a generous grant from a foundation that works closely with the University's service learning center. We had various roles as doctoral students at the GPP. In addition to collaborating with our partners from the ELSP on issues related to curriculum design, program administration and material selection, we worked on-site as ESL instructors, as cooperating teachers for students from the University's L2 teaching practicum, and as resources for additional volunteer teachers from the ELSP, who were not part of the TESOL program at the University. The strength of this partnership was reflected in the collaboration between professional L2 teacher educators (the doctoral students) and the community-based ESL teacher-volunteers (both TESOL program teacher-learners and ELSP volunteers). Additionally, the fact that we were qualified to serve as cooperating teachers for pre-service teacher-learners from the University TESOL program allowed pre-service teachers interested in working with a population of adult emergent readers to have an appropriate setting with supervision for their L2 practicum experience. Until this partnership, the predominant available contexts for L2 practicum students in the program

were University level academic ESL courses, ESL classes in the K-12 public school setting, and adult education programs without emergent readers.

The GPP is a unique program that excels due to the partnership structure at its core. In addition to the partnerships that form the English language program at the GPP, there are additional three-way partnerships that provide support to community members and service learning opportunities for University students. As mentioned above, all partnerships consist of the GPP, a University partner and a community-based partner. The University partners are professors and students at the graduate and undergraduate levels from various departments on campus. Partnerships usually arise from a needs analysis conducted by the GPP with the Resident Committee to identify ways in which the community can better be served. Some partnerships are proposed to the GPP by University departments in order to initiate community-based service learning or research projects, and if deemed meaningful by the Resident Committee, the GPP director and the larger nonprofit entity, they are initiated. As a result, the GPP currently has several programs within various domains, including health sciences, social work, family consumer studies, financial literacy and occupational therapy. Through these programs, residents in the community who have access to the GPP can obtain free services such as driver's education courses, citizenship classes, English language classes, accounting assistance when filing their taxes, eye clinics, general health clinics and much more. The benefit to the University partners (students and professors) is having the opportunity to teach, learn and conduct research in a community setting with capacity building, sustainability of programming and mutual learning at its core.

The physical setting of the GPP is quite different from that of the BFA described in the previous section. The GPP is located in the heart of a large apartment complex housing predominantly immigrant and refugee populations. The GPP office is actually located in a converted apartment on the lower level of one of the apartment units. The main office is squeezed tightly into a small dining room space with the telephone and several files organized next to the kitchen. There are three workstations with computers here, which are mainly occupied by the Social Work students and the program director, who oversee much of the programming on site. The living room doubles as the waiting area and then as the childcare space during the evening ESL classes. The three bedrooms in the apartment serve as the health and eye clinic, the classrooms for all disciplines (e.g. ESL, driver's education, citizenship) as well as the private space for meetings with Social Work students who address all issues ranging from personal to legal and everything in between.

My ensuing descriptions of the context specific to the language program will be colored by my personal experiences as a teacher in this program. The actual classroom for observation in this study was also my classroom when I was teaching at the GPP. It is a small bedroom with a bathroom and a closet. The bathroom is rarely used as students and teachers often opt for the bathroom in the hallway for obvious privacy reasons. The closet is used by most partners to store materials for instructional and health purposes. The ESL teachers keep files with handouts, photocopied worksheets, textbooks, dry erase markers, erasers, visual aids and realia. This classroom is recognized primarily as the ESL classroom and therefore has various ESL related materials on the walls, such as the alphabet which spans the length of the front wall, a calendar, a list of the days of the

week, posters depicting coins, a chart of the numbers 1-100 and some posters with vocabulary related to various topics such as colors, food and body parts. There are also some student-generated texts on the wall, such as basic stories about the students' families and backgrounds.

Space is the biggest issue for the ESL program at the GPP. At the front of the classroom, there is a whiteboard and at the center of the room are two six-foot long tables with 9 chairs around them. Between the chairs and the walls, there is barely room for a person to walk the perimeter of the classroom. Between the table and the whiteboard, there are no chairs as this is where the teacher stands – often having little more than three to four feet of space to move from side to side and only about two feet of space to move from whiteboard to table. While the comfortable capacity in this space is about nine students, there were times that this free English class, serving all nonnative speakers in the large apartment complex, had up to 20 students in attendance – with several occupying standing room only and some even standing just outside the door in the waiting area.

At the time of this study, the ESL class levels were designated as literacy, low beginner, and high beginner/intermediate. Initial and on-going assessment to measure proficiency was conducted by the ELSP staff using the BEST test. Students were placed in classes based on these results. As with many community-based English language programs, the class availability and levels changed from year to year depending on the student population. Some years at the GPP, there were many higher-level students and fewer adult emergent readers. Other years, the majority were adult emergent and beginning readers or low beginning level students. Throughout the history of the GPP,

the vast majority of the students have been women from Somalia, Burundi, Sudan, Burma, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Mexico. Babies under the age of two were allowed to be in class with their mothers, which always provided an interesting dynamic to the class. As teachers in this program, we were accustomed to our students nursing in class, hearing the babies cooing or crying and even having our toes tickled by a stray toddler under the table. In addition, it was not uncommon to have older children running in and out of class to ask their mothers a question, complain about a sibling, or just observe for a few minutes before running out and slamming the door.

The program has an open-entry structure, which means that students can come and go as they please. During my years at the GPP there was no incentive given by outside entities (e.g., DWS) to attend class, although occasionally we did sign forms from DWS acknowledging student attendance. Although the program has an open-entry policy, most students are regular attenders once they start the program. The impact of the open-entry structure was that students could and would leave once they either found a job or entered into a more formal, benefit-bearing program. This meant that some students were present for mere days before moving on, others for weeks, and others actually stayed for years. Those that come for long periods of time seem to see the GPP as part of their community and the service providers and other learners as part of their social network. It was mutual, as we service providers (i.e., University students and professors) also felt strong ties to our long-term students. My colleague in the doctoral program, Eloise and I spent six and four years respectively at the GPP. We knew some of these students very well; we knew their stories, their background, their families, their successes, their

struggles, their needs and their goals. It was very much like a family for many of us at the GPP.

As I noted before, the GPP has evolved since this study and some aspects of the program have changed. From my perspective, the most significant change with relation to the English language program, is that there are no longer any doctoral students from the University collaborating with the ELSP volunteers as teacher educators. Consequently, as the doctoral students are no longer on site to act as cooperating teachers, there are no L2 practicum students conducting their student teaching hours on site. The ELSP volunteers currently teach all levels of the adult ESL classes. Similar to the scenarios for teacher preparation outlined in Chapter 2, these volunteers are given a 12-hour training session through the ELSP and are supported through occasional in-service training workshops and on-line forums, which target various aspects of adult ESL instruction. The ELSP volunteers at the GPP have the freedom to design their lessons and select the materials, with support of the ELSP directors. The University academic department still maintains a presence at the GPP and a partnership with the ELSP in a research-based capacity. An example of their recent work was a study conducted by an M.A. student that explored the efficacy of currently employed standardized assessment measures (e.g., CASAS and BEST test) for gauging level gains of adult emergent readers.

Participants

Two ESL teachers of adult emergent readers agreed to participate in this study. They were selected using purposeful criterion-based sampling strategies. The primary purpose behind the selection of participants for this study was to identify L2 teachers who

would represent information-rich cases for an in-depth study of the phenomenon in question (Patton, 2002), namely actual classroom practices and teacher development of L2 teachers of adult emergent readers. In selecting the study participants, the critical criterion was that the teachers in this study were instructors of adult ELLs with emerging or beginning literacy skills. More specifically, I wanted to work with teachers whose students had not yet been afforded the opportunity to acquire literacy in any language, including their native language.

The two teachers in this study were assigned the pseudonyms Sofia and Nancy Ann. Both participants identify as white, middle-class women who were born and raised in the United States with native English as their mother tongue language. I was open to selecting both native and nonnative speakers of English, and I was not partial to female participants. In fact, when I was searching for potential participants, I considered working with a man from Iran and a man from Burundi. In the case of the former, scheduling conflicts and his students' literacy levels eliminated him as a participant. In the case of the latter, the director of the English language program he worked for did not support his participation in the study. Additionally, I attempted to include another woman from Brazil but had to eliminate her as an option when I discovered that her learners were beginner level students with established native language literacy skills.

The first priority criterion for selection of teacher participants was to make sure that they taught adult emergent or beginning readers. In the case of one of the participants, Nancy Ann, I was very familiar with her students and knew that she qualified. She was a student teacher from the University TESOL program and carried out her student teaching at the GPP under the supervision of my colleague. As for Sofia, I

observed her in the classroom once prior to selection to ascertain that the learners in her class were in fact literacy level learners. In addition to learner level, I wanted to select teacher participants who had completed their TESOL education in a similar context. This was important for selection initially because I had planned to focus closely on how teachers of adult emergent readers incorporated what they learned in their teacher education programs into classroom practice. Only after the study began did I decide that this line of investigation would not be fruitful. The reality of most L2 teacher education programs, as noted in Chapter 2, is that there is little focus on preparing teachers for work with adult emergent readers. I realize that it may be unfair to criticize a university-based program for not having this emphasis in place at the time that both Nancy Ann and Sofia completed their TESOL certificates. Presently, the vast majority of community-based adult ESL teachers is trained by the programs for which they work. Based solely on several years of personal interactions with university students who were pursuing a B.A. TESOL, M.A. TESOL or TESOL certificate, I would argue that most were not intending to seek a career teaching adult emergent readers in community-based settings. Nonetheless, being familiar with the L2 teacher education of both Sofia and Nancy Ann gives me a perspective from which to make recommendations based on this study for future improvements to L2 teacher education programs and professional development, such that they address the context of teaching adult emergent readers.

Important distinctions exist between Nancy Ann and Sofia in terms of their L2 teacher education, the types of teacher knowledge they possess, their beliefs about

learners and their L2 teaching contexts at the time of the classroom observations¹³. These distinctions allow for a broader perspective on the classroom practices that can be considered by researchers and practitioners working in similar environments. The distinctions between Sofia and Nancy Ann will be explored at greater length throughout discussions in this dissertation, however it is worth noting here that while Sofia has been teaching for almost three decades and Nancy Ann for only four years, the number of years they have each been teaching adult emergent readers is approximately the same. The differences between their teaching contexts originally manifested in class size and setting, teacher autonomy, level of supervision, and the extent of teacher training prior to contact with students; however, during the course of this study, Nancy Ann began teaching at the BFA also, so their realities merged. In the following discussion, I will introduce you to Sofia and Nancy Ann to provide a rich description about them as women, teachers and learners.

Sofia

Sofia can best be described as a spitfire, and she would tell you as much. In fact, her pseudonym came about from a correlation I drew between her and a movie character I had once observed and manifested itself when I listened to her talking during one of our interviews. The movie character was Sofia in *The Color Purple*, based on the book by the same name by Alice Walker. In the movie, the Sofia character was nothing less than a spitfire, indeed. But, her spirit was broken at a point in the story, and it took years for her

¹³ At the time I was writing this dissertation, both Sofia and Nancy Ann were working at the BFA; however, at the time that I collected classroom observation data for Nancy Ann, she was only working at the GPP.

to return to herself and rediscover her voice. That critical breaking point in the movie depicted Sofia being knocked down for speaking her mind; the painful scene that depicts her complete disempowerment has stuck with me since I saw it the first time as a child. As I was sitting with my new participant in one of our first interviews, I knew this study was going to take an unanticipated turn when one of her early responses brought this memorable scene to my mind. My initial, anticipated trajectory for this study was a focus on instructional practices of teachers of adult emergent readers; however, from the beginning, my conversations with Sofia have been heavy with talk of policy, marginalization, and disempowerment.

I know good teachers that have been fired because they spoke up and said, ‘this is wrong.’ Those good teachers get kicked out of the system. They objected to a lot of the top down policy that was sent to them that doesn’t make sense, that was destructive in the classroom and as soon as you start objecting you are a trouble maker. I don’t say anything. They avoid me like the plague; I never know what’s going on.

The theme of disempowerment of teachers is not new in educational settings. Other educational researchers have explored top-down decision-making and attempted to highlight these realities in an effort to shift the paradigm. Britzman (2003) dedicated an entire book, *Practice Makes Practice*, to exploring the ‘struggle for voice’ of student teachers in mainstream education through a critical ethnographic study. She astutely notes, “the context of teaching is political, it is an ideological context that privileges the interests, values and practices necessary to maintain the status quo, and ironically, the powerlessness of teachers” (p. 33). Just as Britzman set out to theorize what student teachers do, how they negotiate their identity and how they navigate “oppressive structures,” this study, too, has taken an orientation toward exploring the distribution of power and knowledge as a result of Sofia’s experiences.

Sofia is a career teacher. She has been teaching for the district for 23 years; initially she taught at the high school level, but for over 15 years she has worked as an adult ESL instructor at the BFA and, as noted, recently began working with literacy level ELLs. In our initial interview, I wanted to find out about her educational background for to teaching adult ESL.

Rachel: In terms of literacy instruction, you went to the U, right? What degrees do you have?
 Sofia: I got a degree in, um, TESOL and an M.A. in Linguistics.
 Rachel: So the courses you went through ... did they ...
 Sofia: Was there anything to prepare you to teach literacy? No, no, zero, zip.

She is a contract teacher, which means that she has had greater job security than most teachers in adult education, and she is moving closer and closer to her pension, which she is excited about. However, given how close she is to retirement, she finds less and less energy to voice her concerns about programmatic decisions that she disagrees with because she fears for her job. When discussing how she would handle upcoming changes to the current adult ESL programming, she said, “I’m very frustrated, but at the same time I don’t want to lose my job, so I want to approach this in a diplomatic way.” The greatest frustration for Sofia is the top-down nature of most decision-making in her program. At the end of one school year, Sofia doesn’t seem to know what or even if she’ll be teaching the following year. Three weeks prior to the upcoming school year she reported, “I haven’t heard anything all summer. I have no idea what my schedule is next year. I have no idea what I’m going to be teaching. And that’s very typical.”

In the classroom, Sofia is confident and has a very strong teacher presence. Her classes are always large, even at the literacy level, which poses great challenges to both Sofia and the learners. Sofia is very matter of fact in her instruction. She doesn’t spend

much time at the beginning of any class session to check in with students or engage in small talk. I rarely even saw her engage in greetings beyond calling the roll in class. However, she did know all the students names and taught every lesson with a smile on her face from start to finish. The students seemed to enjoy coming to her class and Sofia cherished their stories, their experiences, and the relationships that she formed with them, even in the absence of deeper communication. In one conversation she reflected on a former student.

I'm just thinking about Lakshmi, an elder refugee – looks late 80s, probably late 60s. Of course it was very difficult to communicate with her, teaching her sounds of letters. She was so sweet ... would hug me. This year she would come in and always says 'hi'.

We will continue to get to know Sofia in Chapter 6 as we delve deeper into the relationships and tensions that make up her activity system at the BFA.

Nancy Ann

Nancy Ann is a retired nurse who recently earned her TESOL certificate in a University program. During this time, Nancy Ann completed her practicum student teaching hours at the GPP with my colleague, Eloise as her cooperating teacher. At the conclusion of her practicum, she decided to continue teaching at the GPP as an ELSP volunteer. During the months that she cooperated and co-taught with Eloise, she was mentored closely on effective integration of bottom-up and top-down instructional strategies for adult emergent readers. She was also involved in all partnership meetings about curriculum design, class scheduling, and assessment. Given this experience, Nancy Ann became very familiar with the teaching context at the GPP and continued to be a critical component to the program as a volunteer and as an important person in the

students' lives for over two years. Following her practicum experience, Nancy Ann had complete control over curriculum design, material selection, and lesson planning. The input from ELSP related mostly to scheduling, assessment, and resource allocation (e.g., textbooks, photocopies). In her dual capacity as student teacher at the GPP and volunteer for the ELSP, she received 12 hours of training from the ELSP. Also, as an adult ESL teacher in a community-based program, she was eligible to participate in a six-hour workshop for teachers of adult emergent readers offered through the State Office of Education and presented by Eloise and me.

Given that her position at the GPP was unpaid, Nancy Ann began to look for work in other adult ESL programs. She was hired by a local refugee resettlement program to teach a literacy level class for a small group of students. Then, she was also hired by BFA, where she was still working at the time this dissertation was written. All observational data on Nancy Ann was collected at the GPP, however some of her reflections, which were collected in interviews and teacher journals, touched on her recent experiences at the BFA. Given that the BFA is the other site for data collection, I felt it was appropriate to allow insights gleaned from both locations from Nancy Ann.

Nancy Ann has a great rapport with the students and every class begins with exchanges of smiles and greetings between Nancy Ann and the students. She often uses a lot of humor in her instruction, and I never observed a class where the students were not laughing at one point or another because of something Nancy Ann said or did. She has a very dynamic, animated style of teaching and often uses gesturing, miming, and funny voices alongside her visuals to facilitate vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Her approach, which reflects a great deal of patience and relies on well

established classroom routines, supports these learners through necessary repetition, recycling, and a slower pace of instruction. In Chapter 6, we will explore in depth the activity system in which Nancy Ann operates as the subject.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously over the course of one year. The multiple sources of data for this study include observations, interviews and documents. Sofia and Nancy Ann continued with their existing teaching schedules and did not have to adjust their teaching in any way.

Observation

The goals for the observations in this multicase study included describing the phenomenon in its natural setting and understanding the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants (Hatch, 2002). I observed the ESL classes, compiled field notes and memos about the classroom activity (e.g., teacher behaviors, student behaviors, interactions, materials, topics, etc.) that contributed to a deeper understanding of the teachers' practices. I was a nonparticipant observer, thereby taking no role in the class beyond observer. Additionally, I followed up on my field notes with the teachers to clarify questions that arose during my observations in order to ensure accurate representations of the phenomenon prior to analysis. My notes consisted of thorough descriptions of everything that I observed in the classroom, including but not limited to instructional practices, literacy teaching strategies, student behaviors, and material

selection. I paid particular attention to elements of instruction related to key components of effective literacy instruction, but I was also drawn to include information about student-student interactions and the students' ability to 'do school.' Alongside my descriptive notes were memos made to myself during the observations that included potential themes for observational data units as guided by activity theory, questions to ask the teachers after observation and issues I wanted to investigate further with relation to instruction or teacher preparation and development. For each participant, observations ended when I felt that I had reached a point of saturation with the data (i.e., observations seemed to be reflecting prior observations and no critical new information was forthcoming). In both cases, this point came at around twenty classroom observation hours.

Interview

Throughout and following the period of observation, I interviewed the teachers to understand what informed their classroom practice and to confirm the hunches that I had during the observation period. I also spent time getting a sense of their feelings about the program, the context, their teacher knowledge, and their educational backgrounds in terms of their formal teacher education programs. The scheduled interviews were semi-structured, and the spontaneous interviews were informal conversations that arose naturally following observations. The interviews aimed to investigate the research questions by exploring decisions made by the teachers in the class, gaining their perspectives on my interpretations of the observed class sessions, and determining which challenges they identified in their practice within this context. The semi-structured nature

of the interviews allowed me to influence the general direction with some guiding questions, but I maintained flexibility to add follow-up questions to the participants' responses and to allow for elaborate conversational responses from the participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). The early interviews focused on teachers' backgrounds, training experiences, and insights about teaching adult emergent readers. Interview questions were initially informed by the observations, allowing for a deeper consideration of themes that emerged in the observation field notes during the on-going analysis. As relationships and tensions emerged in the activity system, interview questions began to address them in order to determine how the teachers perceived them and what they considered appropriate measures to target the tensions.

Documents

Documents were analyzed to give further information about teachers' training and their classroom practices. From the classroom context, the documents included materials used by the teacher for instructional and assessment purposes. The most important documents for the study were the participants responses to prompts that I sent them, which followed up on classroom observations, explored their beliefs about teaching adult emergent readers, attempted to gauge their awareness of certain contradictions in the activity system and probed them for initiatives that would address certain tensions that I uncovered. Finally, a list-serve discussion on teaching ESL to adult emergent readers was used as a reference for additional insights for my interpretations and as a potential source of negative evidence.

Data Analysis

As noted above, data analysis happened concurrently with data collection throughout the course of the study. Given that data collection could go on for as long as the teachers provide classes to observe, data collection ended when the on-going analysis indicated that new categories or themes ceased to emerge (Merriam, 2009). The observational data (field notes) were initially coded to target instructional practices that focused on literacy skills, classroom management and use of materials. Additionally, I coded observations of students' behaviors to keep track of instances of 'doing school' effectively or poorly. These codes allowed me to take stock of what I was seeing in the classroom; however, the general activity theoretical coding that targeted components of the activity system and highlighted central themes as represented by contradictions in each situation were the codes that informed the majority of the analysis (Merriam, 2009). The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed by me, allowing for deeper interactions with the data. As with the observational data, the interview data was organized into categories based on themes uncovered through the activity theoretical analysis of contradictions within the activity systems. Finally, the classroom documents were considered for referred to when reflecting upon the teachers' classroom practices, but their responses to my prompts and email exchanges were the only documents that I coded. I did so in the same fashion as with the interview and observation data as guided by activity theory.

Data was analyzed using the constant-comparative analysis (Merriam, 2009), allowing for analysis both within each case and across cases throughout the study. This allowed me to consider case-specific data with relation to the particular activity system

under investigation while also allowing me to explore trends that existed across activity systems. While within-case analysis provided rich insights into each activity system, the power in the findings from this study came from the cross-case analysis, which allowed me to make some broader generalizations about teacher practice and professional learning based on similar findings in each case (Yin, 2003). Due to financial and time constraints, I coded the data using traditional methods of marking and notation making with colored pencils, pens and highlighters. Data were stored and managed using Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word software.

Trustworthiness

In this section, I will discuss the efforts made to ensure the trustworthiness or rigor of this study. Trustworthiness is a measure in qualitative research that speaks the conventional notions of validity and reliability of research. Trustworthiness underscores that the study results are sound and the methods for arriving at those results encompass rigor and quality. Qualitative researchers traditionally spend a healthy amount of time writing about their choice of paradigm both descriptively and defensively. This practice is a reflection of the history of tension between practitioners of quantitative and qualitative modes of inquiry, the latter being considered less scientific in postpositivist circles, although I would argue that this sentiment is shifting in some fields with the continued output of qualitative research that maintains high standards. In an insightful article on quality and trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry, Sue Morrow (2005) argues eloquently for qualitative researchers to consider embracing criteria for trustworthiness in research that align best with the paradigm within which they are working. She notes that

there are certain standards for trustworthiness that transcend paradigm, such as “... sufficiency of and immersion in the data, attention to subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and issues related to interpretation and presentation” (p. 250). However, she also states, “As long as qualitative researchers are apologetic for our unique frames of reference and standards of goodness, we perpetuate an attitude on the part of postpositivist researchers that we are not quite rigorous enough and that what we do is not “real science” (p.252). Eventually, qualitative researchers will feel confident about diverging from the tradition of justifying our approaches and move toward one of simply describing them. In this dissertation, however, I take a slightly more conservative approach in discussing the ways in which I ensured trustworthiness in this study. I highlight the criteria that are specific to the interpretivist paradigm of this study and the ways in which they added to the trustworthiness and more importantly, the social impact of this study.

Most qualitative researchers employ a set of “parallel criteria” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), which loosely aligns with the quantitative standards for quality such that internal validity is said to correspond to credibility, external validity to transferability, reliability to dependability, and objectivity to confirmability. The value in these parallel criteria is two-fold but not without criticism. First, these criteria help to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative research traditions in that it makes qualitative research more acceptable in realms where quantitative research and postpositivist paradigms represent the dominant modes of inquiry (Morrow, 2005). Also, the practices in place to ensure that the parallel criteria are met do inherently promote rigor in the research and incorporate qualities that should be inherent in all research as noted above (Morrow, 2005).

Criticism for the use of parallel criteria comes to light when we consider what defines qualitative research, especially within a constructivist/ interpretivist paradigm. The nature of this paradigm is such that the participants and the researcher are working together to make sense of the multiple realities that they create and negotiate throughout the research process. Additionally, these realities are informed by the culture and context of the situation being explored, as well as the relationships formed among individuals involved in the study. For these reasons, satisfying criteria such as confirmability presents a challenge. Nonetheless, I have addressed trustworthiness in this study by concurrently considering the parallel criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability alongside another set of criteria considered more relevant to interpretivist paradigms.

This unique set of corresponding criteria includes fairness and four authenticities: ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln, 1995; Morrow, 2005). *Fairness* ensures that measures are taken to invite participant input on the researcher's interpretations and to create a space wherein their voices can be heard throughout the study. *Ontological authenticity* follows up on the fairness criteria in that it ensures that these constructions by the participants are expanded upon, giving both the researcher and the participants the opportunity to further negotiate understanding and perspectives while making sense of the multiple realities being explored. *Educative authenticity* gives the participants the chance to better understand the constructions of other participants and the researcher. Given the transformational nature of this study, *catalytic authenticity* is of particular importance as it highlights the action that is promoted by the research. By extension, the *tactical authenticity* speaks to the act of

putting things in motion to motivate change as a result of the research process. In the next several paragraphs, I will describe how I have addressed all of the above criteria to the best of my ability in order to ensure trustworthiness in this study.

Credibility or believability of qualitative research is reached when the phenomena under study is clearly identified and described in detail. Credibility in this study was achieved in many ways throughout this study. In designing the research, I made certain to incorporate multiple sources of data, which is referred to as a triangulation of data sources in quantitative inquiry. In this study, the use of interviews, observations, and documents provided sufficient data for a holistic view of the phenomena at different points in time and from various perspectives. I was able to compare interview data from both participants and compare this to the observational data to better inform my interpretations. Additionally, I addressed credibility through prolonged engagement with the participants and the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Given the ethnographic nature of this study, I spent 20 observation hours in each language classroom and additionally spent several hours speaking with the participants informally before and after observations and formally during our semi-structured interview sessions. There were also numerous opportunities to communicate over the course of this study via email and on the phone. With regard to the data, I spent many hours listening to recorded interviews, transcribing the interviews, coding observational data and the interviews and revisiting the data over and over. In addition to my prolonged engagement with the participants and the data, I kept a researcher journal, in which I tracked the progress of the study and noted emerging insights and burning questions to follow up on with my participants and colleagues. I also participated in a peer research group, which allowed each of us to

process our research, explore our methods, problem solve, and keep each other on track. Finally, and most importantly in this type of research, I have made a concerted effort to include rich descriptions of the participants, their experiences with the phenomena and the context of this inquiry.

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings in the study will be useful to readers working in similar contexts or to researchers investigating similar questions. Qualitative research is particularly challenged in meeting the criteria of transferability because sample sizes are often small, multiple realities are acknowledged, and the values of the researcher are inseparable from the inquiry process. However, striving to ensure trustworthiness is still paramount, and I have made great efforts to address this criterion through rich descriptions of the study, participants, and context. These rich descriptions allow other researchers and practitioners to determine if what I have uncovered is relevant to their particular contexts. I have also been very explicit about my position as the researcher, my background, and my biases, all of which may impact my interpretations in this study.

The ability of researchers to replicate a study speaks to the reliability criterion of quantitative studies and can be addressed by the parallel *dependability* criterion in qualitative inquiry. While replicability is rarely the objective when designing a qualitative study within the interpretivist paradigm, ensuring dependability is crucial. According to Morrow, the key to addressing dependability lies in the audit trail maintained by the researcher. The audit trail is “a detailed chronology of research activities and processes; influences on the data collection and analysis emerging themes, categories, or models; and analytic memos” (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). I provided a clear account of the data

collection and analysis methods, and throughout the course of the study, I carefully managed the data. I also tracked the progress of this study in my researcher journal. Marshall and Rossman (2011) further note that ensuring dependability requires that the researcher is transparent in extrapolating how and why certain changes in the design of the study take place as related to increased understanding of the phenomenon through analysis and prolonged engagement with the data. In response to this, I have noted in several places throughout this dissertation when changes to my design or plan came to pass, such as deciding to account for Nancy Ann's insights from her new job at the BFA. All data, including field notes, high quality audio files and transcribed interviews, along with my journal have been available for review by my peers, advisors and colleagues during this process.

The last of the parallel criteria is *confirmability*, which speaks to the concept of objectivity with the study. The measures taken to address dependability above, namely the audit trail, is also a means to address confirmability. In addition to the audit trail, I conducted member checks that followed up with my participants to confirm or contest my findings. I conferred with them to make sure that my interpretations were fair and representative of their experiences. I also discussed some of my emerging findings with other teachers of a similar population in search of alternative explanations or experiences. Along these same lines, I reviewed on-line discussion forums on the topic of teaching adult emergent readers and read numerous publications from within the field to locate additional evidence to support my insights about the identified contradictions. Qualitative research within the interpretivist paradigm is inherently subjective, so I have done my best to own my biases and lay them bare in this study. However, in this study my role is

action-oriented and is ultimately aimed at a reconstruction of the phenomenon through meaning-making and initiating expansive learning cycles with Sofia, Nancy Ann and other stakeholders. In this way, I am exerting control in this study not through my distance and objectivity but through “fostering emancipation, democracy, and community empowerment and of redressing power imbalances” to give voice to the teachers (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011, p. 118).

The extended constructions of validity include fairness, ontological authenticity, educational authenticity, catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity. I will address them here to bring them into the qualitative research dialogue and show their role in promoting rigor in qualitative studies.

Fairness brings the balance to a study and demands that efforts are made to incorporate “all stakeholder views, perspectives, values, claims, concerns, and voices” in order to “prevent marginalization, to act affirmatively with respect to inclusion, and to act with energy to ensure that all voices in the inquiry effort had a chance to be represented” (Lincoln, et al., 2011, p. 122). In this study, many of the perspectives beyond those of the teachers were included, though often collected indirectly. For example, some insights about the realities faced by administrators or caseworkers were reported through third hand conversations or were reflected in the literature through the collective experiences of individuals in similar roles. I have included some information from exchanges I had with stakeholders in both language programs, to shed light on some of the contradictions. Additionally, my employment at a refugee resettlement agency and my involvement in the GPP partnership have broadened my perspective such that I can bring additional experiences and perspectives into the conversation. The principle of activity theory that

outlines the multivoicedness of the framework promotes the inclusion of multiple perspectives and therefore aligns nicely with the fairness construction. My proposal to expand on the present study by taking an activity theoretical perspective on an entire activity system from the perspective of administration and another from that of the learners suggests that additional fairness could be implemented in the present study (see limitations and future directions for this study in Chapter 7.).

Ontological and educative authenticities are two constructions that compliment the fairness (and credibility) criteria in that by ensuring that participants are involved in the negotiation of understanding at two levels. Ontological assumptions address the nature of reality and in qualitative research paradigms; reality is noted to be something that is created by the social actors that live that reality. In other words, reality is relative and there is no one, true reality. In the case of *ontological authenticity*, participants have the opportunity to weigh in on the interpretations of the researcher with relation to their perspectives, while at the same time allowing for the researcher to articulate his or her standpoint and represent the multiple realities being represented. *Educative authenticity* gives the participants the chance to consider the multiple perspectives presented by others with whom they interact, including that of the researcher. In the present study, efforts were made to disclose the challenges faced by the entities that presented contradictions in the teachers' activity systems through top-down, teacher-excluded decision-making. Additionally, by inviting the participants to contribute their ideas for impacting change on the system, they were able to ponder the possibilities given the realities and perspectives of other stakeholders.

Catalytic and tactical authenticities align with two activity theoretical principles related to the role of contradictions and the possibility of expansive learning. *Catalytic authenticity* refers to the ability for research to promote action by participants as a result of the research process or the findings. In this study, the catalyst for action lies in the contradictions that will be highlighted and the desire of those involved to address them in some productive, progressive way. *Tactical authenticity* inextricably ties the researcher to this transformation by urging involvement at the level of training participants on how to be social and political actors (Lincoln, et al., 2011). In the case of the present study, the training might involve facilitating the participants and other individuals in the activity system as they grapple with the discovered tensions and develop ways to address them as a community of practice.

Researcher Positionality

My involvement in this study was fluid and ultimately, I played an active role within the activity systems of Sofia and Nancy Ann. This role evolved, however, and my active involvement only occurred toward the end of the study as we began to collectively address the tensions we uncovered in the activity system. My earlier role during the 40+ classroom observation hours was one of a nonparticipant observer. Early interview sessions were more formal with both Sofia and Nancy Ann, but they eventually became more friendly and comfortable. In the case of Sofia, we did not know each other prior to this study and I perceived a feeling of mistrust on Sofia's behalf toward researchers, or perhaps the 'Ivory Tower' in general. Prolonged conversations during which she was given ample opportunity to voice her concerns and truly be heard created a relationship of

mutual understanding and support. With regard to Nancy Ann, there was an initial power differential due to the fact that I had been her instructor in two different educational settings and a mentor of sorts at the GPP when she was completing her student teaching hours. This shifted as we spent more time talking and then ultimately working together to co-present two teacher education workshops for teachers of adult emergent readers. In interviews with both Sofia and Nancy Ann our conversations moved naturally around the topics we were discussing relevant to this study, but they also included casual conversations about our lives and our upcoming plans, both professionally and personally.

Through these conversations and discoveries of the contradictions in the activity systems, it was impossible for me to maintain a neutral, removed position with regard to their lived experiences. I did not plan to become inexorably involved beyond this study in the development of these two professionals, but it is in my nature to seek empowerment opportunities when presented with even the slightest evidence of oppression or lack of voice. Fortunately, the choice of activity theory as the conceptual framework for this study strongly supports moving from simply identifying tensions to proactively transforming activity systems to address the tensions through expansive learning. Additionally, work within the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm warrants my involvement as a 'passionate participant' and 'facilitator of multivoice reconstruction' (Lincoln, et al., 2011). This involvement of inquirers in any action related to the study has led to criticism from positivist and postpositivist research practitioners who see action as destabilizing to the objectivity of the study (Lincoln, et al., 2011); however, I have already noted that my involvement is supported by my choice of activity theory as an

analytical, catalytic tool and further promoted by the decision to conduct research within a constructivist paradigm.

As I am a teacher educator with particular interest in training teachers to work with adult ELLs with emerging literacy skills, I had to make sure to be careful about my biases related to instructional techniques and strategies within this context, such that they did not skew my interpretations about why the participants made the choices they did in class. Fortunately, my personal experience of transitioning from a teacher education program with a focus on academic ESL into the context of teaching adult emergent readers provided me with the capacity to relate to any feelings of unpreparedness or the sense of inadequacy that the teachers conveyed. In addition, any time I had a question, I simply asked them what informed certain decisions. With specific regard to Nancy Ann, I had interactions with her prior to this study as both an instructor in one university course and at least one professional development seminar and worked alongside her as a colleague at the GPP. With this in mind, I had to make sure not to favor her in my interpretations or let our relationship color my analysis of either participant's classroom practice.

Coming into this study I had very clear assumptions about what a teacher preparation course or program should look like for teachers entering a class of adult ELLs with emerging literacy skills. The reasons for my assumptions and biases are based in my own classroom teaching experience with students at this level, but perhaps more significantly, in my experiences as a cooperating teacher in this context and as a teacher educator with a focus on this context. After developing a course with a colleague to train teachers to work with these learners, I have a set of criteria in mind for what makes an

effective teacher in this context. Critical to teaching adult ELLs with emergent literacy is a foundation in bottom-up strategies for literacy instruction. This is something that is very often overlooked in L2 teacher education programs so it makes sense that many teachers might not employ those strategies in the classroom. However, on the flip side of that, some teachers who have a background in teaching young students who are beginning readers might be very well versed in teaching bottom-up skills. Additionally, even when teachers develop bottom-up strategies for teaching literacy, they often struggle to find the balance between bottom-up and top-down strategies that will allow them to integrate the two effectively for optimal learning and literacy development. Given these beliefs and knowing the teacher education background of both teachers, it was my assumption that they might not possess certain practical knowledge for teaching adult emergent readers. I had to keep this in mind as I observed the classes, interviewed the teachers and analyzed the data.

An additional and related assumption that I had was that the challenges faced by Sofia and Nancy Ann would primarily reflect difficulty in identifying and applying strategies for teaching literacy effectively, adapting existing materials effectively and assessing learners in the classroom. These assumptions were based on my personal challenges in the classroom and my conversations at workshops with teachers in this context. I made sure these assumptions were not projected onto their practices so that I could remain open to the reality of their experiences. My limited experience with a formal adult education setting such as the BFA resulted in my having to clarify many issues related to policy and power throughout the course of this study. In this endeavor, Sofia was my strongest source of information about the politics of the instructional

setting and issues related to power that I had only read about in articles and briefs, but had yet to experience in my own practice.

Ethical Considerations

In keeping with the moral standards set forth by the U.S. National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, I followed the procedures of the University's Institutional Review Board. In doing so, I ensured that this study would uphold respect for persons, beneficence and justice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The participants were invited to participate based on adequate information that I provided them about the study. Given the qualitative, exploratory nature of this study, there was no way to predict the exact direction of the research, however, participants were provided with the purpose for the study, my original research questions and a general overview of the intended methods for data collection and analysis.

I made a commitment to avoid harm to my participants, and even as this study became slightly politicized, I ensured that no harmful testimonies would emerge to affect their professional lives. I guaranteed anonymity to the best of my ability, although as noted by Christians (2011), "watertight confidentiality has proved to be impossible. Pseudonyms and disguised locations are often recognized by insiders" (p. 66). I acknowledge that there is the possibility that individuals who know about this study will be able to identify the individuals in the study and knowing this, I have taken extra consideration when giving voice to their experiences, making my interpretations and reporting my findings. In terms of justice, the study aimed to be fair and free of burden to the participants. Meeting times and locations were always negotiated such that the

participants could decide when and where we would meet and for how long. The benefits of the study have already begun to emerge and impact the participants in positive ways.

The continued benefits of the study are yet to be seen, but as a team of researcher, teachers and program administrator, we are continuing to move forward into the expansive learning cycles.

CHAPTER 5

CONTEXT AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

This chapter sets the stage for the discussion of findings in this study. The objective of this chapter is three-fold. First, I extrapolate the components of each activity system in the study and provide a graphical representation of each. Next, I present the data analysis in greater detail to show how the activity theoretical themes used in the coding process resulted in particular categories for data sets. Finally, I provide a preview of the predominant tensions and relationships that impact each activity system. These will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 6.

Modeling the Activity Systems

Modeling an activity system, as noted in Chapter 3, requires identifying what constitutes the various components in the activity system. The components of an activity system include subject(s), community, object and desired outcomes, rules, division of labor and tools. Using Mwanza's Eight-Step Model (see Chapter 3), I have questioned each activity system to clearly delineate the activity itself, teaching ESL to adult emergent readers, and to extrapolate the components of the activity system. I will discuss the constitution of components in the two activity systems. Given that classroom observations for Sofia and Nancy Ann were conducted in different sites, their activity

systems also have distinct features. However, there are enough similarities that I will discuss them together, noting distinct features for clarification throughout the discussion.¹⁴ Following the analysis of the two activity systems, I will represent the activity systems visually using Engeström's triangles.

Subject

The activity system under investigation at the Bright Future Academy is an ESL literacy level class taught by Sofia. This activity system is being considered from her perspective, thereby deeming her the subject of the activity system. Sofia is the sole teacher of this class, although she occasionally has volunteers in class to assist during independent reading time. Sofia makes all curricular decisions, in terms of lesson planning, choice of materials, pace of instruction and in-class assessment. At the Global Partnership Program, Nancy Ann is the subject of the activity system, which also represents a literacy level ESL class. She was the sole teacher of her class at the time of the observations. Later, at the BFA, she originally started out as an assistant to a master teacher in a literacy level class for recently arrived refugee populations; however, she is currently teaching her own classes.

Community

The community comprised in Sofia's activity system, in terms of who shares interest in the object (student learning) and outcomes (goals) of the activity system,

¹⁴ Interestingly, as Nancy Ann was later hired by the BFA, her activity system at the time I completed this dissertation is almost identical to Sofia's. As noted previously, many of the insights from Nancy Ann weave together her classroom and institutional experiences at both the GPP and the BFA.

includes Sofia, the learners, other teachers in the program, the school administration, case workers (and related entities), families of the learners and the greater community that comes into contact with these learners in society. The most active community members in this activity system are Sofia and the learners, however, the impact of interactions (or lack thereof) with other members of this community prove to be important in this study. The school administration includes members of the secretarial staff in the front office who assist in registering new students for classes and administering standardized assessments (e.g. CASAS) to determine English language proficiency level for each student. It also includes the program directors who make decisions about staffing, scheduling, programming and professional development. The caseworkers also play a role in this activity system, as will be revealed in the next chapter, as do other stakeholders concerned with the education and vocational training of newly arrived refugee populations. Other teachers in the program play a large role in this activity system, but not in the ways you might expect. The role of teachers in this activity system will be uncovered in the next chapter.

Nancy Ann's activity system at the GPP entails a different community make-up. Similar to Sofia, her community includes the learners, their families and the greater community with which the learners interact in society. However, there is no administration or significant impact of caseworkers (or related entities, such as DWS). As discussed in Chapter 4, the GPP excels due to its reliance on critical partnerships. As such, there are community members at the GPP that do not exist at the BFA. These include University students from various departments who interact daily with Nancy Ann's learners, her colleagues at the ELSP and stakeholders at the nonprofit entity that

oversee the GPP. In many of the correspondences (interviews, informal conversations and emails) with Nancy Ann, her reflections on community predominantly reflect her experiences at the BFA where the tensions seem more prevalent. Her experiences at the BFA were rather insulated, and she had a great deal of autonomy; however, there were some tensions, which I will discuss from this context as well. The community component in Nancy Ann's activity system at the BFA is the same as that of Sofia.

Object and Outcomes

The object (objective) for each activity system can be labeled as English language and literacy development. The outcomes vary slightly from one activity system to the next as they are shaped by the teachers' beliefs about what their learners' goals are, what their aim should be according to their respective programs, and, ultimately, what they think will best serve their learners in the real world. Underlying both activity systems is a desire to empower learners through increased access to a print literate society and increased confidence during interactions with the English-speaking world. The outcome for Sofia's activity system includes a list of skills that she wished to target in her class.

My major goal for my literacy level students is to make them feel more confident and less overwhelmed with written materials of all kinds. I want to give them the chance to be able to read or at least understand a little when they read with their children or grandchildren. I want them to be able to fill out basic written forms that ask for their name, address, phone number, etc. using print that most people would be able to decipher. I want them to be able to find a page number in a book and know where the top of the page is.

In the case of Nancy Ann, she says that her “overarching goal for the students is to have them be able to decode English in order to make more sense of their new lives and be able to participate, with their families, in the broader community.” She also adds,

My “weekly goal revision” includes helping them understand how to ask and answer basic questions and be able to demonstrate progress on tests that are given to them regularly. I have been trying to emphasize directions and instructions as well as reading and writing on worksheets and forms. I try to give examples about how they might encounter ‘circle’, ‘check’, ‘fill in the blank’, etc. in real life.

Her goals or targeted outcomes are also based in her understanding of what these newcomers need, rather than what the program administrator or her partners at the GPP have set forth for her. However, being a novice teacher, much of what she focuses on is likely guided by the knowledge base she developed through her recent TESOL certificate program and her student teaching hours with her mentor teacher, Eloise.

Rules

Each activity system has its own set of rules, with the BFA having a more structured set of explicit rules in place than the GPP. However, in both activity systems there are explicit and implicit rules that are adhered to in varying degrees by members of each community. *Explicit* rules include the assessment procedures that are in place in each activity system. At both the BFA and the GPP, these procedures are guided by policies determined by assessment choice (e.g., CASAS or BEST Plus) regarding the number of hours of instruction between tests for each student (e.g., BEST requires testing after 60 contact hours) and rules related to administration (e.g., certification of proctors). There are additional explicit rules at the BFA set forth by the caseworkers and related entities that impact Sofia’s activity system; however, they were not a factor in Nancy Ann’s context at the GPP. These will be addressed in the discussion on tensions between teachers and other interacting activity systems.

Implicit rules at both the BFA and GPP address scheduling, attendance and classroom conventions; however, the learners at the BFA more closely adhere to these rules than learners at the GPP. The more ‘formal’ setting of the BFA with a school district presence and power distributed throughout several entities including administration and teachers, somehow lends itself to better rule enforcement. In addition, the role of the Department of Workforce Services at the BFA provides incentive to the students in the form of certain benefits (e.g. food stamps) for attendance. The GPP on the other hand has a supportive, but casual environment, that strives to build trust and self-reliance in those that utilize the provided services. There are no monetary incentives in place for attendance; however, they do benefit from being part of a community and receiving free English language instruction.

Division of Labor

The division of labor in each activity system has both horizontal and vertical dimensions. These dimensions address the distribution of power within the activity system, which can be horizontal as between teachers working at the same level within the system or vertical, as between the administration that makes many of the rules and policies and the teachers who are impacted by these decisions. Within the classroom, the division of labor can be considered from the perspective of instructional strategy choice, which shapes the amount of control the teachers assume during classroom activities. In each activity system, the prevalence for teacher-controlled instructional strategies assigns most of the control to the teacher; nevertheless, attempts were made within each activity

system to increase collaborative learning, at times resulting in tensions that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Tools

The component of tools within each activity system presents the greatest complexity for this model. There are both cognitive and physical tools within each activity system. The cognitive tools include the teachers' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes that shape their decision making in the classroom. Language use also serves as a cultural artifact in each activity system and the teachers' use of language is considered in light of their practical knowledge and classroom practices. Physical tools include the handouts, texts, materials, visuals and realia that the teachers use to mediate their instruction, as well as in-class assessment practices and choice of learning activities. Teacher education and professional learning opportunities also serve as important tools in each activity system, guiding teachers' decision-making processes and providing resources for personal and professional development. The students' background knowledge also presented itself as a tool that they used to mediate their approach to 'doing school'. Availability of and access to tools are addressed in the next chapter.

Representing the Activity Systems

Using Engeström's triangles, Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2 below provide a graphical representation of each activity system to demonstrate the context for each teacher's practice.

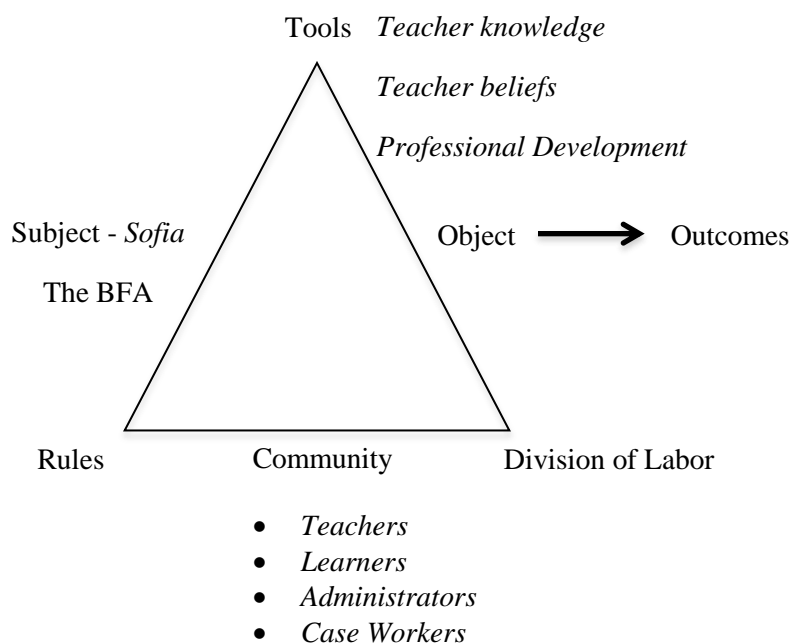


Figure 5.1: Sofia's activity system at the Bright Future Academy

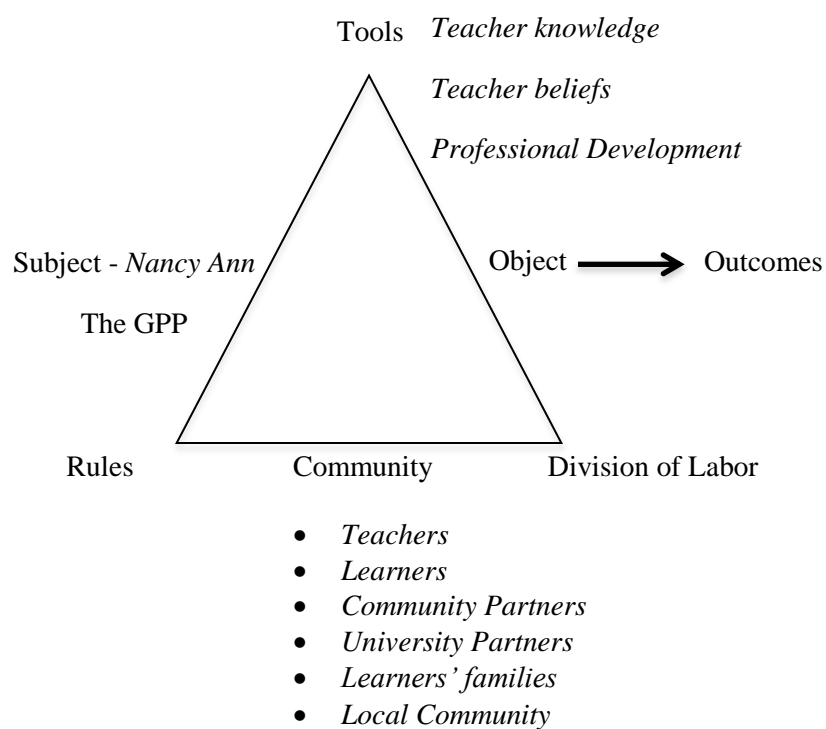


Figure 5.2: Nancy Ann's activity system at the Global Partnership Program

Identification of Relationships and Tensions

In exploring the two activity systems, I uncovered several noteworthy relationships between components of each activity system. Some of the interactions between components in these relationships presented tensions that will be highlighted and discussed at length as contradictions in the activity system. Isolating the contradictions occurred through immersion in the data to discover themes as per the methodology set forth by Mwanza (2001). I decomposed the activity system into subactivity units for closer analysis, allowing me to target relationships between an actor (e.g., subject or community) and the object as mediated by tools, rules and divisions of labor. In decomposing the activity system, I discovered that most of the contradictions were secondary (i.e., between two components of the activity system). There were far fewer primary contradictions, represented as inner contradictions within one component of the activity system. Those that I did isolate centered on tensions between teachers' knowledge and/or beliefs and their actual classroom practices.

As far as tertiary and quaternary contradictions are concerned, they do exist and are largely impactful on the teachers' activity systems. Exploring a situation using the third generation of activity theory allows for a broad analysis, not only within one activity system but also within and between two interacting activity systems. In this study, I have uncovered tensions between teachers and the administration. It was beyond the scope of this dissertation to model and decompose the entire activity system of the administration, which would have required in depth interviews with the administrators and staff. Instead, I will discuss these tensions as they exist between the administration as members of the community component and the object as a secondary contradiction

reflected in the experiences of the teachers.

Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the context for the activity systems under analysis in the next chapter. Each activity system has been modeled to provide a complete frame of reference through which to understand the ensuing discussion of relationships and tensions within the systems. The two activity systems are seen from the perspective of the ESL teachers as the subjects of the human activity. Various tensions experienced as primary and secondary contradictions are presented in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6

EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

Uncovering Tensions within Activity System Relationships

While the two activity systems do possess several similarities in terms of the components that exist within each, the relationships between the components are not identical from one system to the next. Relationships between components in one activity system may represent negative tensions or contradictions while in the other activity system, the relationship between the same two components displays no tensions or perhaps, positive tensions. Negative tensions are those that somehow place a strain on the activity system or cause a breakdown within the system. For example, a contradiction between the students' goals in the classroom and the teachers' understanding of those goals could result in the students' needs not being targeted and met. However, given this same contradiction as an example of a positive tension, the teachers' goals for the students' could be more appropriate for the students as they will be informed by her awareness of what the students will need to function in a print literate society, secure employment and interact with her children's schools.

As discussed previously, exploring relationships in the activity system and subsequently identifying contradictions as represented by tensions in those relationships is not a cause for concern or discouragement. In fact, it is only through uncovering these

contradictions that we can begin the transformation process through expansive learning and reformulations of activity systems to address the contradictions. I embrace the perspective that uncovering these contradictions is only the beginning and that activating important, progressive changes to the system in response to these tensions is the ultimate goal.

In this chapter, I will explore the relationships within each activity system and disclose the tensions that represent the predominant contradictions existing at each level (e.g., primary, secondary, tertiary and quaternary). As discussed in Chapter 4, I initially conducted a within-case analysis for each activity system followed by a cross-case analysis to identify similarities and differences between the two in terms of the relationships and tensions present in each. As they are two separate activity systems representing the perspectives and lived experiences of unique subjects, Sofia and Nancy Ann, they do present distinct contradictions. However, the cross case comparison also reveals that there are several contradictions that exist within both activity systems. Given the interactive nature of my data analysis and the complimentary nature of the findings, I will discuss contradictions within the activity systems together in this section, alternating between the experiences and insights of Sofia and Nancy Ann as coherently as possible.

Primary Contradictions

Each activity system displayed contradictions at the primary level within the subject component of the activity system; however, the contradictions within each were distinct. Sofia's primary contradictions exist between her actual classroom practice and her reported classroom practice, and I would argue, between her actual classroom

practice and her desired classroom practice. I will elaborate on this last point shortly. After collecting data for numerous classroom observation hours, it was apparent that Sofia's practices were heavily weighted on the side of approaching literacy instruction from the bottom. In other words, the majority of the strategies she employed targeted the development of bottom-up skills with a focus on phonics, fluency, and developing phonological and orthographic awareness. This contradiction is a weak contradiction in that Sofia does acknowledge that she tends to focus more on the "phonics," but her practical knowledge, which has developed over years of teaching ESL to higher levels, includes the awareness that contextualizing learning and making it meaningful for adult learners is important. She has expressed in conversations that she does this readily with her upper level classes. The contradiction, therefore, lies in the fact that Sofia's practical knowledge for teaching adult ELLs with emerging literacy skills is still developing, and, in the meantime, she is doing the best she can for this level given what she knows; however, there is an unmet need in her instruction, which is making the learning meaningful by integrating the 'whole' with the 'parts' of language (see Chapter 2).

Sofia relies rather extensively on Reading Horizons, a text for developing bottom-up literacy skills in adults with emerging literacy skills. Reading Horizons has developed an edition for illiterate native English speakers and a separate edition for ELLs. Interestingly, she prefers the edition that was designed with native speakers in mind, rather than the text for ELLs. She justified this choice to me in a discussion on materials, showing me how quickly the ESL version progresses from the concepts of noun and verb to subject and object. She also demonstrated how methodically the text for native speakers guided students through the early stages of literacy development with ample

practice of emerging phonological and orthographic awareness skills. Her decision-making for text selection and her effective use of this text reflect her commitment to effective teaching. She has routines based on the activities in the book that reinforce previously learned skills and highlight ‘doing school’ by training students to attend to the various sets of directions that occur throughout the curriculum.

After several observation hours with on-going analysis of the field notes, it became apparent to me that the majority of Sofia’s lesson targeted bottom-up skills with very little attention to top-down skills, such as vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Additionally, there were infrequent opportunities for expansion to the students’ real lives. Emphasis in the field on integrating top-down and bottom-up skills (e.g., Whole-Part-Whole literacy instruction) led me to develop a coding scheme for the classroom data to identify how often the two were being addressed. I created bottom-up codes to target instruction that focused on orthographic awareness, phonics, phonological awareness, fluency development, explicit instruction (e.g., marking two-letter slides and explaining phonological rules) and reading readiness skills (e.g., holding the pencil and orienting the paper). Within the category of top-down skills, I identified data that targeted learners’ background knowledge, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and expansion of learning to the ‘real world’ or ‘real life’.

The contradiction initially arose in a discussion about her application of top-down strategies to contextualize the learning so that it is more meaningful to the students. The following transcript from my field notes shows a typical dictation routine in Sofia’s class:

[Each student has a small white board, a dry erase marker and a mini-eraser. They are all prepared for dictation and are used to the routine at this point. Two students are at the front of the class with dry erase markers

to write on the large white board. These are more ‘advanced’ students and serve as a model (scaffolding) for the other students.]

Sofia: [gives directions] Listen. I will say the word *two* times. [holds up two fingers] You will repeat *two* times and you will write ...?

Ss¹⁵: One time.

Sofia: *One* time. Ok. Listen. [says loudly, slowly] *bad, bad*. [Sofia enunciates final [d] sound very clearly. Students repeat; write. Sofia walks around the classroom and students hold up their whiteboard for her feedback.]

Sofia: Change the [æ] to [ɛ]. Change the [æ] to [ɛ]. So now it's *bed*; [Sofia says in alternation] *bad, bed, bad, bed*. Do you hear the difference? [Students agree. One says, “different.”]

[Student volunteers at the board are quick and accurate. Actually, one is. The other watches her and then copies.]

[After each dictation word, Sofia says, “erase.” All erase.]

[Dictation continues.]

[After each dictation, Sofia goes to the board and reads the minimal pairs back to back]

Sofia: *fad, fed, fad, fed, fad, fed*

[Sofia follows routine for minimal pairs: *bad/bed, fad/fed, had/hem*]

Sofia: The next word is a name. [Says two times.]

Ss: Name

Sofia: Not my name. Somebody else's name. What happens to the first letter in a name? [Asks two times.]

[Some students say *name*. Some say letters ‘N’ or ‘M’]

[Sofia writes a name on the board: *Amina*.]

Sofia: [points to two ‘A’s (A, a)] Are these the same?

Ss: Yes

Sofia: They are both ‘A’s. What’s different?

1 S: uppercase, lowercase

Sofia: uppercase, lowercase. [nods] Good.

[Sofia explains first letter of name is uppercase.]

[Sofia proceeds with dictation - Meg and Jeb. Then continues with additional dictation but no longer as minimal pairs: *mad, bad, dad, ham, fed, gag, Lem* (notes this is a name).]

In reviewing the observation notes from Sofia's class, it is clear that data coded as bottom-up are in the majority over data coded as top-down. The above transcript is representative of many of Sofia's Reading Horizons lessons. She employs a lot of dictation, which is very effective for developing bottom-up skills and providing the

¹⁵ Ss = students

students with instant feedback. It is also very engaging for the students; they smile and laugh as they write at their tables and compare their whiteboards to one another before holding them up for Sofia's feedback.

My classroom observations did reveal examples of top-down instruction, but they were limited both in quantity and quality. At times, she attempted to build background knowledge prior to reading a story, or she deviated from a dictation exercise to teach an unknown vocabulary word. In most cases, the level of depth and breadth of the top-down, meaningful instruction is not sufficient. The following samples of classroom data show ways in which Sofia attempted to get at student comprehension or activate background knowledge:

Example 1

Sofia: Do you know this? [pats leg]
 Some students say *leg*.
 Sofia: Good. Now write it. *leg*

Example 2

[Text - Sam and Pat, Lesson 2]
 Sofia: In the picture, where is Pat? Where is Pat? Look at the picture. Where is Pat? Where is Pat? Is Sam in the van?
 Ss: No
 Sofia: No. Sam is not in the van.

Example 3

[Picking back up with Sam and Pat, Lesson 2]
 Sofia: [draws attention back to picture] Where is she?
 Some students: kitchen.
 [Briefly discusses oven]
 [Sofia writes on board: *Pat is going to bake ham in the oven.*]
 Sofia: What else do you cook in the oven?
 Ss: [throwing out ideas] chicken, fish, cookies, cake, turkey, rice
 Sofia: Do you cook rice in the oven?
 Ss: No.

Following these teaching moments in Examples one and two above, Sofia had the students read the story together as a class, sentence by sentence as she pointed to each word. For some of the sentences, she repeated after the students while for other sentences, she read word for word while students repeated each word after her. After they read through the story once, she gave them 10 minutes to practice reading independently or with a partner. She told them that if they could read through the story in ten minutes, she would give them chocolate. Some students read in pairs. A few were not reading. One was staring at the page while another two were talking in Somali and laughing. Sofia moved from table to table, reading with individual students at each table. It was my observation that the students did not have enough time to become acquainted with the text, vocabulary and meaning in this story before being directed to read independently.

In a follow-up interview, I asked Sofia if she regularly prepares the students for the various readings, in terms of building their vocabulary and activating their background knowledge before reading. Her response shows a level of uncertainty or a tension around what she actually does to activate background knowledge and scaffold the readings, and ultimately, she acknowledges that she does lean more toward the bottom-up skills.

No, I do. Like with Sam and Pat and stories about what it means and writing questions about you know, um, let's see ... [looks in book] What is Sam's problem? ... putting that question on the board or, um, let's see ... [looking in book] ... ok, yeah, talking about all of these pictures. ... talking about all of these pictures. Where is Sam? What's the problem here? Why is Sam mad? Who is this? So, yeah, I do that. Um, and read through it for them. So I do a little bit. But I really try to have mostly bottom-up instruction in the literacy class. To have them discover things on their own because that's the way they remember at the lowest level.

In another discussion about upcoming schedule changes and reassignment of teachers to new levels (e.g., literacy, intermediate, advanced) she explained that she would still be teaching one literacy class. The language she used to talk about what she would be doing with her classes reflects her disposition about the importance of bottom-up skills for this level, especially in the first sentence of her statement, where she uses ‘phonics’ as a catchall term for what she does in this class.

I’m going to be teaching phonics in the afternoon, still. But my class, um, I was teaching two different classes, two different levels. They had divided literacy into levels 1, 2 and 3. So, level one was still working on Sam and Pat, as far as being able to read that and still establishing the letters of the alphabet and having a sound. And then the, the other literacy group that I’ve been working with, um we are, um ... we’ve almost finished going through all of the letters and they ... um, they’ve got slides down. And I was just gonna start introducing the phonetic skills.

And we’ve been skipping all over the place as far as Sam and Pat readings, you know, lessons from anywhere. And, uh, I’ve been working a lot on first and last. First and last word in sentences; first and last letter in words; first and last names; just first and last ... just to get that idea and then counting how many words in a sentence; counting how many letters in a word; just counting ... just that idea of recognizing a word as a word, cause that’s a really big step right there.

Here, she partially acknowledges the inconsistent and scattered approach that unfolds in the class. Many of her instructional practices are dictated by her choice of Reading Horizons as the core curriculum. Throughout the classroom observations, I noted increased confidence when teaching the bottom-up skills, including explicitly targeting slides, blends, phonetic rules (as outlined in that curriculum), decoding skills and reading readiness skills. On the contrary, she often spent too little time developing connections between the words used to develop bottom-up skills and their actual meaning or relevance to students’ lives.

There is a clear relationship in this activity system between Sofia and her developing practical knowledge and beliefs about teaching literacy. Within this relationship, there is another emergent tension. She expressed her desire to learn more about teaching literacy and even indicated that she would like to conduct research on literacy acquisition. She has shared numerous stories of students making gains in her class demonstrated through successes with reading and writing at the most basic levels. However, she has also expressed various times that teaching literacy level ESL is quite the challenge for various reasons. These challenges have led to her reconsidering whether or not she wants to continue teaching literacy if given the choice.

One of my greatest frustrations with my literacy class is my lack of preparation time. Cutting out all of those words and letters is *sooooo* time consuming. And then, where do you store all your hard work so that you can use it again. As I was putting away things at the end of the year, I came across resources that I could have used more but didn't. It would be so helpful to have more time to think about, prepare, and organize lessons and materials.

That's what bothers me. That could involve a whole lot of work and, um, I just know that this would stress me out and I just know that this [teaching literacy] will stress me out because it's a whole lot of work. So, I'm gonna go for this level [advanced]. But, do I even have a choice? Are they going to force me to teach this level?

Sofia's decision making in the class and the development of her practical knowledge for teaching literacy could be mediated by the tool of professional development; however, the relationship between the actors in the activity system and the professional development tool presents a great tension in the activity systems that manifests as a secondary contradiction. These will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

Nancy Ann would be considered a novice teacher, while Sofia would be considered an expert teacher if we were determining expertise by years alone (Tsui, 2003); however, experience can be defined more broadly to account for effectiveness.

Teachers and administrators might define experienced teachers as those who have taught for many years, are able to motivate students and hold their attention, know how to manage their classroom effectively and can change course in the middle of a lesson to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities to enhance student learning. (Rodriguez & McKay, 2010, p. 2)

In reality, Nancy Ann and Sofia have worked with adult emergent readers for approximately the same number of years, which complicates being able to identify one as novice and the other as expert. In addition, the majority of Nancy Ann's L2 teacher education has centered on 'what works' with adult emergent readers. Given this focus in her preparation, she demonstrates an exceptional ability to integrate the bottom-up and top-down skills in her literacy instruction. Here is an example of a typical Sam and Pat lesson in her class at the GPP:

At the beginning of the lesson, Nancy Ann flashes a stack of cards to review letter sounds. She elicits letter names followed by letter sounds, saying alternately "What is the letter name?" and "What is the letter sound?" After going through all the sounds, she flashes cards with vocabulary words that the students have been working with since the beginning of the Sam and Pat book. [As each new story introduces new vocabulary, those words go into the stack. Nancy Ann noted that the students actually do read much better on the days that she flashes the vocabulary prior to reading as opposed to the days when they do no vocabulary review.]

They read the story three times. The first time they read, they read all together word by word, rather slowly. They stop for clarification where needed, such as to elaborate on new or difficult vocabulary (e.g. 'cut' in this story). Nancy Ann refers back to previous Sam and Pat stories to keep it context. For example, when they read *Sam can fix it*, Nancy Ann said, "Remember? Sam is good with his hands." This was something they spent time with in the previous class and story. The second time they read, she points to the words but they read without her voice. She points to the words and moves her lips to help them figure out sounds.

On the third reading, they focus on reading comprehension. She asks them, “What are they having for dinner?” The students look through the story for food vocabulary and list what they are eating. Nancy Ann says, “They’re gonna have a good meal, but ...” and she flips to previous story where the oven breaks. They talk about the oven going ‘pop, pop’. Nancy Ann says, “No heat! What’s Sam doing? What is he doing?” The students are silent and Nancy Ann points to the word ‘fix’ on the board, “What’s this word?” The students say, “Fixed it.” [The lesson continues in this fashion, alternating between a focus on bottom-up and top-down reading skills, including decoding, fluency development, tapping into background knowledge, vocabulary development and reading comprehension.]

Within Nancy Ann’s activity system, the primary contradictions exist between her practical knowledge and her perception of her practical knowledge. For Nancy Ann, there is a confidence issue that arises time and again, which stems from the fact that she is new to the teaching profession and views herself as a novice. As noted above, because of her more recent L2 teacher education experience, which included workshops and courses targeting effective literacy instruction for adult emergent readers as well as her extensive mentoring by Eloise who is a literacy teaching specialist, Nancy Ann is an effective literacy teacher. However, time and again she highlights that she doesn’t have a “big education background” and that she doesn’t have the jargon or knowledge about certain acronyms to join conversations in the program.

Her lack of confidence seems to be reinforced by her status in the language programs where she has worked since completing her TESOL certificate. At the GPP, she started as a student teacher but stayed on as a volunteer with the ELSP. She shared a conversation she had with the volunteer coordinator at the ELSP regarding a program decision with which Nancy Ann did not agree. She was told that she was “just a volunteer” and, thus, felt that her input was not valued. Later in the year, she took a part time hourly position with a refugee resettlement agency, teaching literacy level ESL classes to newcomers from Bhutan, Burundi, and Sudan. Several months after she began

working for them, the organization began to experience heightened financial distress. During an interview, I asked her how her work was going there. She responded, “No, poor [name of organization]. They ran out of money. I said, well, if you’re gonna lay someone off, it might as well be me.” On more than one occasion, she referred to herself as the “low man on the totem pole.” This indicates that she views herself as dispensable in these programs, perhaps due to a perception of herself as less trained than her colleagues.

Further development of this negative self-perception in terms of her value as a teacher took place at the BFA. She was hired as a part-time hourly teacher to assist Eloise with adult emergent readers in a program supported by a new grant awarded to the Department of Workforce Services. Nancy Ann and Eloise were happy to be working together again and were enjoying the new facility, which gave them much more space and provided more resources than their previous co-teaching experience at the GPP. In fact, Nancy Ann even had some of her old students from the GPP in this class. After several months at the BFA, there was another cut in funding to the new program within which she was working. Eloise opted to leave and take another job with the State Office of Education and Nancy Ann hoped she would be considered for the position of lead teacher for this class. She described to me what happened and how ‘in the dark’ she was. Of special note are the underlined words and phrases that capture her lack of self-confidence or at least missing sense of place in the program.

I talked to [Eloise]. I’m so naïve that I don’t know the organization. I was just the helper of [Eloise] and then I was going to be my own little teacher. And I was hoping that I would get a bigger block of time. ... Then they just collapsed the [] program. They combined groups based on test scores. If you were the closest to this group based on scores, you go in this group.

So ... where was I? Uh. I don't understand the program and who's in charge and so I just go around naïve and ask questions. And I felt like I was bugging [the director] because I would go ask, "Any news on the [program]?" And when [Eloise left] she sent emails that I had a job. 'I'm quitting so this is good news for you.' So, I'm sitting there waiting for the call and it never came. And I talked to her and she said, "Have you talked to [the director] yet?" And I said, "no" and she said, "Go talk to him."

So I go, "[Director], any news on [the program]?" [He says,] "We're going to collapse the groups in." So, I thought, *damn*. And it was a business decision and I understand that. They were using more resources for fewer students. But it wasn't communicated in a way that was ... I had to go find out and it was like a slap in the face. [Eloise] felt bad because she told me that it was sure, then [the director] goes home and thinks, *we can't do that* ... so I got sort of stranded on that. Over the break, I've only been a sub.

This contradiction within the activity system of Nancy Ann highlights the impact of top-down decision-making on teachers, which I will address in the next section on secondary contradictions. In addition, this contradiction reveals that teachers who exemplify good classroom practices and display rich practical knowledge in certain areas of instruction need to be acknowledged and celebrated. Not doing so runs the risk of decreased teacher confidence and even a feeling of marginalization or insignificance to the programs in which they teach.

The most hopeful discovery in revealing these primary contradictions in the two activity systems is that they are tensions that can be targeted and reformulated. In each case, transformations can take place by addressing the ways in which teachers mediate their practice through the development of teacher knowledge and the reshaping of beliefs to increase their confidence. In my discussion on expansive learning cycles (Chapter 7), I will present the exchanges that are currently taking place within local institutions to enhance teacher access to these tools and promote critical conversations that will lead to greater teacher development.

Secondary Contradictions

The contradictions at the secondary level are rather extensive and will be discussed as they pertain to the sub-activity units of the larger activity system (Mwanza, 2001; see Chapter 3). This section focuses on secondary contradictions that impact the activity system in noteworthy ways, leaving some of the less overt, nuanced contradictions out of this discussion. In this section, I will address contradictions within these sub-activity units: subject-tools, subject-division of labor, community-tools, community-rules and community-division of labor.

While these are listed as dyads of interacting components in the activity system, it is important to remember that the relationships between two components entail actions directed toward the object (objective, purpose) of the activity system, which is to promote learners' development of English language proficiency and print literacy skills, by the subject through the mediation of another component (rules, tools, division of labor). This is worth noting here, because while all actions in this activity system are directed toward the object, some of the tensions within these relationships hinge on misaligned perceptions about what the object and outcome actually are or what actions should take place toward the object to generate outcomes.

Subject and Community ~ Tools ~ Object

The tools component in each activity system comprises a large number of physical and cognitive mediators that effect the actions of the subject and community toward the object. The tools that emerged as most impactful on the relationships within each system include: teaching materials, teacher knowledge (e.g., practical knowledge,

pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, beliefs), professional development, students' background knowledge and experiences (e.g., in relation to 'doing school') and assessment. They will be discussed in terms of their role in mediating the relationship between the subject and the object as well as that between the community and the object.

Subject ~ Tools ~ Object: Teaching Materials

For both Nancy Ann and Sofia there is a tension related to the materials available for teaching this level. They navigate these tensions differently because of the relationships they have with the materials. On the one hand, Sofia uses a more eclectic approach to material selection in her class, at times moving from one curriculum to another within one class period and regularly within one week. Nancy Ann on the other hand tends to adhere more closely to one curriculum consistently for extended periods of time. I attribute the difference between their relationships with materials to their varying levels of experience with language teaching. On the one hand, Sofia has been teaching for many years and has learned to adapt and move more fluidly between materials while Nancy Ann appears to stay close to what she knows based on her mentorship with Eloise and her recent teacher education, which revealed a reliance on fewer texts, such as Foundations, Laubach Reader, Sam and Pat and the Ventures series.

For Nancy Ann, the impact of limited materials for this level and her inexperience with adaptation means that she spends an extensive amount of time in one text, however this tension is positive for the students. The prolonged engagement with the primary text (*Sam and Pat*) resulted in apparent student gains within the key areas for literacy development. For example, she reported that the speed with which they could recall the

letter sounds during a flash check¹⁶ increased because the vocabulary was constantly being recycled and new words were added in manageable sets (e.g., 3-5 new words per day). In addition, their ability to correctly identify sight words went up as quickly as the number of sight words she added to the stack, all of which came from the stories they were working with in the *Sam and Pat* text.

In addition to improved decoding skills, Nancy Ann reported that their reading comprehension developed steadily for each story, as did their reading fluency. These positive developments are potentially linked to the repetition of the stories from the *Sam and Pat* text, the recycling of vocabulary, the integration of both bottom-up and top-down reading strategies and the instructional routines established around the readings. The excerpt from her class that I discussed in the section on primary contradictions is exemplary of most of her lessons. She begins with a flash check of sounds and vocabulary, followed by discussing new vocabulary, the title and any pictures. Next she reads the stories multiple times, in multiple ways. Finally, she ensures reading comprehension either with interactive discussion, story retelling or worksheets from the text. A potential downside to this tension between Nancy Ann and the limited available materials that she utilizes is the potential for teacher burn out on the stories; she did note that the readings have become quite repetitive for her, though you would never make that assumption upon observing her class.

In the case of Sofia, her experience does provide her with a sense of confidence and comfort when moving between curricula. She seems to make decisions quickly in

¹⁶ A flash check is a strategy that Nancy Ann uses at the beginning of every lesson. She takes the students through the alphabet with a focus on each sound (not letter name) and then she takes them through a deck of sight words from the stories they have read up to that point.

response to the students' engagement with the materials as well as her beliefs about what they should be learning, which in the literacy class is often the bottom-up reading skills. She also has a more critical eye when it comes to choice of materials for her students and this often reflects her attention to student needs. She has expressed ideas for how she would approach designing a text differently to better serve her learners. She pays close attention to font size, length of directions and spacing on the page. She draws from experiences with students who reported being unable to read certain texts because of the font size and/or because of poor eyesight. In one conversation, we were talking about materials and I was just about to share with her the *What's Next* text that I picked up at the LESLLA conference. Before I could even mention it, she pulled out her copy and said, "Did you see the New Readers Press [text], about Samsam? I've got Basic. ... [She opens the book and points at words.] It's too small. It's too small. Um, it could be so much better. So much better." Her attention for these details shows her experience and her deep knowledge about what is important for student learning.

Subject ~ Tools ~ Object: Teachers' Pedagogical and Practical Knowledge

Given the obvious value in reading practice for reading development, both teachers devote time to reading; however, their approaches differ. Nancy Ann typically controls the entire lesson, keeping all students' attention on her and the task at hand. She typically structures the reading in such a way that she is always leading the students through the text. As demonstrated in the section on materials, she moves from a whole class choral reading (including her) to a choral reading in which she remains quiet, but scaffolds the activity by mouthing the words and using her finger to follow the text on

large butcher paper. Then she often has them read in ‘teams’ by dividing the class in half and asking to read certain lines of the text. Finally, she will often have them attempt the pair reading, but as evidenced by her anecdote above, it’s not always very successful.

Sofia’s class is primarily teacher-centered, however she often directs students toward individual practice, especially with reading. This learning time is sometimes focused on the development of bottom-up literacy skills (e.g., practicing writing letters, copying sentences, reading word family lists), but often engages students in sustained independent reading practice, which often inadvertently turns into collaborative reading. The students in her class rarely read alone. They trend toward sharing texts and trying to figure out words on their own.

Arguably one of the most influential approaches to language teaching in recent decades has been Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The majority of most L2 teacher education courses place a very strong emphasis on collaborative learning, active learning, learner-centered instruction and student interaction. Teachers are taught to avoid being the transmitter of knowledge and fight the Atlas Complex that would otherwise have them feeling the weight of the world (class) on their shoulders. Teachers should not view the students as an empty vessel waiting to be filled. As with much of the content from courses in the teacher education program, many notions of communicative language teaching center on learners having a certain level of oral language proficiency, and in many cases, well established first language literacy skills.

The tension, therefore, comes to light in the activity systems of both Nancy Ann and Sofia when their pedagogical knowledge compels them to engage the students in collaborative learning but their approaches appear to fail them. On the larger scale, this is

a quaternary contradiction because a neighboring, interacting activity system (the university-based language teacher education program) and the present activity system (the literacy level ESL classroom) are approaching the object of student learning from different paradigms. However, here we will address only the secondary contradiction, which is that between the teachers' actual instructional practices and their pedagogical knowledge about ESL instructional practices.

In workshops and courses on working with adult emergent readers with lower oral proficiency skills, Eloise and I have promoted a trajectory that begins with a contradiction related to CLT. In our experience with this learner population, we have found that effective instruction and focused student learning is supported by teacher-centered approaches initially, with the ultimate goal being learner autonomy. Collaborative, communicative learning bridges the two ends of the spectrum, however, effective peer learning at this level requires the reformulation of teachers' pedagogical knowledge. Reconceptualizing 'what works' with ELLs was a challenge for me, and I see that same challenge reflected in the tensions of these two teachers' activity systems.

Instructional strategies, including how student learning is structured (e.g., individual, pair, small group) can determine the success of a learning activity and the extent to which learning is being managed well. In several conversations, the topic of collaborative learning came up with both Nancy Ann and Sofia. The trend in both classes was that the teachers designed and delivered the lesson, exerting a good deal of control over the students' involvement and interactions. In exploring the potential for collaborative learning in these classes, both teachers expressed that it is not typically effective. Nancy Ann said she has the students work in pairs "a bit." She recounts,

“Working in pairs is hard. If one of them is doing it and then, you’re giving some attention to that one pair, the others just stop.” Sofia’s experiences mirror this sentiment.

“Working in pairs and groups with this level is very difficult because even with the simplest activity, it is very hard to communicate what you want the students to do.”

These comments show that the teachers have attempted to have their students work together and after reflecting on these experiences, they have both concluded that it is “difficult” to carry out.

Nancy Ann and Sofia related their experiences with implementing pair work on several occasions. Two key breakdowns occur: 1) students are not always sure of what they should be doing and 2) students stray off task. As noted above, Sofia finds it difficult to convey what she wants the students to do. Nancy Ann shared the same feeling. In the following exchange, we discussed her attempts to implement pair reading in the class. I asked, “Do you do pair reading?”

- | | |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nancy Ann: | Sometimes. The pair reading was what was starting to fall off. They would have a hard time reading to each other. They would just start talking to each other... and with their own accent and the other person would be [looks away] totally ignoring them. |
| Rachel: | Do you think that’s a breakdown between what you’d want them to do ... |
| Nancy Ann: | It was very difficult to explain that to them. |
| Rachel: | How could you explain that to them, the benefit? |
| Nancy Ann: | Yeah, it was hard. I’d say Rukia, you read this story to Serafina. They’d be like ‘ <i>Why?</i> ’ ... They get used to hearing the teachers voice, who is pronouncing things ... well ... sort of correctly. And I think it’s too hard to listen to someone and try to understand them because they ... |
| | But the rest of them are kind of like [looks around] and that’s when the background talk starts and so they’re not as attentive. And if you call on the next person and you didn’t go around the circle they would have no idea where to start. Because they’re not following along and I could show them and tell them that, but they don’t necessarily do it. |

Today I was pleasantly surprised, someone who I thought wasn't paying attention ... when I called on her to read she was, [snaps finger], she was paying attention.

Sofia's attempts to employ pair work in the class have also resulted in some frustration.

I have tried to have students work on flash cards with pictures and words in small groups. What usually happens is that they spread the pictures out on the table and start trying to figure out what the pictures might signify. They usually do this in their own languages. It is unusual for them to turn the card over and use the English word to try to figure out the picture. What usually happens is that I rotate to the different tables and work with the groups individually. As soon as I leave, they start doing other things.

Interestingly, when it comes to reading practice, Sofia's experience with peer interaction is positive. She finds that the students actually do work well together.

I often give my students time for free reading. They can either read *Sam and Pat* or other books that I have selected that are easy reading. They often work with each other during this time, either working on reading a text together, asking about words, or listening to each other read something. Whenever I have volunteers come into the classroom, I try to allow for free reading so that students can get one on one attention. I feel this is really essential for literacy level students.

Basically, I find it very frustrating to try to get students at this level to work together except when they are doing free reading. They love to correct each other and talk about words they encounter when they have a book in front of them. I find this to be the most effective use of peer teaching.

In the absence of extensive high quality teacher education and preparation for work with adult emergent readers, much of what these teachers do in the class is based on trial and error. The above comments shed light on their feelings about the efficacy of collaborative learning at this level. In an effort to maintain some 'control' over student learning, they rely primarily on teacher-centered approaches to instruction and do so based on the feedback from their experiences. Arguably, there are ways to promote student interaction at this level and ensure student comprehension of the task at hand,

however, this practical and pedagogical knowledge does not grow without sunshine. In other words, as the teachers navigate these challenges and reconceptualized their knowledge for this context, they need opportunities to reflect with peers and problematize their situation in order to come up with effective solutions.

Subject ~ Tools ~ Object: Teachers' Beliefs about Students

The learners in each class are both part of the community of the activity system but also intrinsically linked to the object of learning English and developing literacy skills. The tensions present between the subject and the object are reflected in a potential mismatch between what the students' goals are for their learning and what the teachers' goals are for their students. In the model of the activity systems, the overarching goals or aims that the teachers articulated are represented by the outcomes component of the activity system because this is what the teachers are striving for in their classes. What if their goals are misguided by their *beliefs and assumptions* about what the students need rather than what the students *actually* need? All actions from all components of the activity system are directed at the object of student learning, however, some rather striking contradictions arose during conversations with the teachers about the students' goals.

The tension became most apparent when neither teacher could articulate exactly what she believed her students' goals were. When asked to list the goals of her students, Sofia responded, "Goals. Well, I'm really not sure. Many of the students in my literacy class are grandparents and get supplemental income from their children from what I understand. The others are parents, and I believe their main goal is to find paying

employment.” She goes on to explain the difficulty in determining the goals of her students because of the language barrier.

When I first started with the literacy class, I tried to find out more about my students in class. It was very difficult. I remember trying to determine if one student was married. After taking quite a bit of class time on this question, I thought I had figured it out, but later heard something different from another of his teachers.

How does one talk about goals at this level? Many of my students come into class just repeating everything that I say to them. I feel like I’m in an echo chamber.

Nancy Ann’s understanding of the students’ goals is guided mainly by her own perceptions of why they attended class. “Many students seem to attend class only to assure benefits, with little effort to learn English.” She also notes that her “understanding of students’ goals is mostly based on conversation ... talking with them and hearing them talk with each other.” In our conversation about students’ goals, Sofia said that she spends a good deal of time targeting goals with her advanced classes. She has them write down what they want to learn in the class and what they hope to accomplish with improved English language proficiency, but at this level, she lamented that she really is not as certain about their reason for being in class.

In the same vein as not knowing exactly what their students’ goals are, both teachers have expressed the sentiment that the general inability to communicate at a deeper level with their students is a challenge. In both classes, not only is the literacy level of the students emergent or very beginner, but so too is their oral proficiency. Many of the students are able to give basic personal information, engage in high frequency greetings, and respond to some basic questions; however, many utterances toward the students are best understood through the accompaniment of gesturing, visuals, and realia. This is fine at the level of instruction when teachers scaffold their teaching to promote

reading comprehension and vocabulary development; nevertheless, when it comes time to get to know their students, find out information about related to their learning, or discover reasons behind absences, the teachers generally have to fill in the blanks.

Related to instruction, Sofia lamented on the challenge in teaching complicated phonetic skills for decoding without being able to help the students understand the meaning behind her instructional choices. “One of my biggest challenges is not having the means to communicate the importance of understanding that letters have both a name and a sound, and why this knowledge will help them be able to read.” In addition to not being able to convey to the students the rationale behind her instructional choices, she is left to speculate about their feelings toward the learning process and the potential factors the impact their learning. In a conversation with both Sofia and Nancy Ann, Sofia shared, “I think many of my students feel frustrated. They’ve been in school for months and they still can’t read. They have busy, overwhelming lives that leave them little time to think about reading and writing in English outside of school.” Of course, this frustration is a two-way street for teachers who have no sense of the true impact of their efforts. Sofia twice during this study used a phrase that inspired the title for this dissertation (‘the echo chamber’). In a conversation about teaching literacy she said, “When I have really, really low level students for a long period of time, it can just be overwhelming. I feel like I’m in an echo chamber. ... There’s absolutely no comprehension of what you’re trying to get across.”

Similarly, in a conversation with Nancy Ann, I asked how things were going with the class and she reported, “Breakthroughs are slow in coming.” We continued to talk.

Rachel: Do you feel like what you’re coming up with on your own is working, or is there something else you’d envision for support?

Nancy Ann: I think a lot of my things are working; I think they're ok. I haven't had any really major bombs. Sometimes I feel like I wish I had a little more perception about whether something is going to be ... you know, easily understood by them, or do I need to do some more supplementing because ... So I've had a couple of units where I would try to present something to the class and they're like, *hmm*? I'd go back and look at other texts and bring other stuff in, ya know. So it would be nice to have a little more knowledge about that.

In a later interview with both Nancy Ann and Sofia, we discussed the issue of eyesight of many students. Sofia said she is sensitive to the issue because she, too, has poor eyesight, so she recognizes when the font size in the text is posing a challenge to particular students. However, the issue of limited communication between teachers and students still poses a problem in that they are unable to discuss eyesight and eye glasses with the students.

Nancy Ann: They won't wear glasses. They won't wear the glasses. They think they look funny. Just one thing after another. People not understanding what glasses do. Bifocal glasses. We tried to teach a unit on vision.

Sofia: And then who knows how they communicate with the doctor to know if they have the right prescription. I have a lot of students who are constantly taking off their glasses.

Rachel: Can you imagine the headaches?

Nancy Ann: Most of them get them from Walgreens. And not everyone has the same in each eye. The key is communicating with the physician. When people say I need glasses or I want to get glasses ... Brynn¹⁷ was going to find someone at the University that was going to provide an examination but it didn't happen. How do they communicate the task?

Rachel: Even if they have an interpreter, how do you interpret some of these things in the language, Kirundi?

Sofia: Yeah, and I have a, um, one of my students who's been here for a while and is quite verbal has a very handicapped child, along with twins and four children under the age of 10 and she wants to learn but she's so frustrated with her progress because it's not fast enough. And she's making great progress, but that too ... to

¹⁷ Pseudonym

communicate that they're making great progress cause it's so important.

Nancy Ann: Yeah, they get depressed because they don't think they're doing better.

Subject & Community ~ Tools ~ Object: Professional Learning

Professional learning communities hinge on the availability of opportunities for collaboration among members of a community of practice. Collaboration within a program can greatly enhance teacher learning and professional development and conversely, the absence of opportunities for collaboration can lead to feelings of isolation, lack of power and frustration - all of which surfaced in conversations with Sofia and to a lesser degree, with Nancy Ann. Further, professional learning communities provide essential support to teachers as they continue to develop their knowledge base and theorize practice, which is particularly necessary for novice teachers such as Nancy Ann who struggle to connect theory and practice when the base for each is not well formulated. Finally, professional learning communities require support from the program administrators and others that impact decision-making related to professional development of teachers. In this discussion, I will touch on each of these themes as they arose as contradictions in the activity systems of Sofia and Nancy Ann.

Professional Learning and Communities of Practice

While at the GPP, Nancy Ann shared a group of learners with another instructor. He taught the first hour of class and focused on life skills addressed topics as presented in the text for class (e.g., family, shopping, transportation). Being very eager to learn, get new ideas and improve her own practice, Nancy Ann always sat in on the first hour to

observe her colleague. She told me, “I like to import information and techniques from other teachers and have done so shamelessly.” During the second hour of this class, Nancy Ann shifted the learners’ focus to literacy skills using the decodable text, *Sam and Pat*, as her core curriculum. Her colleague never stayed for her class, but Nancy Ann never expressed any specific desire that he do so. However, she did attribute much of her development as a teacher to her collaborative experiences while working alongside Eloise at both the GPP and the BFA.

Nancy Ann’s feelings about the value of collaboration evolved alongside her identity as a teacher and when she was working at the BFA, she did articulate some conceptions about teacher collaboration. “Well, we’re a pretty small group, but I still think that even within our group it would help to be able to bounce ideas off each other more. For me it would. I would really enjoy that.” I asked Nancy Ann what her suggestion for professional development might look like. Her answer perhaps reflects her uncertainty with what might be possible, but she did express a desire to have more time for collaboration.

Well, for me right now ... within the school would be good - to hear from other teachers in the school cause they’d be able to give me ideas based on their knowledge of the same population. So that would be really helpful. And, so they understand the population and they understand ... the constraints ... of the, um, program and they have some knowledge of the materials that are available at the school. And so I think that would be really helpful on a regular basis. Maybe even just once a month. Ya know? Get together ...

But, because the way things are scheduled ... so that there is no extra time ... there is none. None of the teachers have any prep time. There’s also no time between classes. She ends, I start. So, if we just had a block of time that was teacher time, to get together even just once a month, for an hour and everyone could get together and have ... I mean it would have to be structured at first, or probably always ... and have the topics that we’re going to discuss. Ok, *What are some the new things that have worked for you? What are some problems? Could someone help solve those?*

There are some people that have really so much experience that could be such good resources but you never get to sit down with them. We're always rushing off to everybody else's second job.

In addition to wanting to 'bounce ideas off one another' for the benefit of her practice, she also noted the value that collaboration would have for the learners. She recounted a story about a student in her literacy level class who made great gains between starting the program as a newcomer and moving out of her class into the next literacy level with another instructor. When this student moved into the next instructor's level one class, there was a breakdown for the student. "We were pretty tight to the book and the next class, which was Mike¹⁸ ... and he's a fine teacher, but his way is very different and he doesn't coordinate curriculum with anybody else. So when they got in there, they couldn't figure out what the program was, let alone learn - too disconnected." In this light, she saw the value in collaboration as a tool to support student movement through the program. She noted that different teaching styles may result in students being conditioned for 'doing school' in one way, only to be unprepared for the ways of 'doing school' in another classroom with another teacher.

In the case of Nancy Ann, the lack of collaboration is a tension because of the impact she believes it has on the students' ability to navigate through the program successfully. Sofia echoes this concern and additionally notes the need for more collaboration as a catalyst for teacher development and curriculum alignment.

I would love to have some time to collaborate with my colleagues and find out what they are doing in their classes for so many obvious reasons. It would allow us to benefit from different techniques that we use. We could talk about the progress of individual students and move them when we feel they are ready. We could make sure that we're not duplicating curriculum.

¹⁸ Mike is a pseudonym for another teacher at the BFA who teaches Literacy and Level One ESL classes.

She additionally noted the isolation that the teachers are experiencing in the program during several of our conversations. *Insufficient time* appeared to be one of the greatest predictors for the lack of interaction between teachers.

I don't know about the other teachers who have lunches scheduled at a different time, but from what I have heard, few of them have the time to sit and relax and talk during their lunch. Most are entering attendance, planning classes, talking with students, or making copies.

Now we see the lack of collaboration, adding a new tension between classes that serve the same students.¹⁹ According to Sofia, the lack of interaction between teachers negatively impacts the students because there is no discussion of aligning curriculum across levels and within levels. She shares, “as far as curriculum for the classes, it used to be that the teachers met regularly and we ... and we had teams and stuff like that. The program is so disjointed now that nobody ever sees each other anymore.” When I asked her about the other literacy level teachers in the program, she told me that neither of them has an ESL teaching background. In terms of what they are doing in their classes, she states, “I have absolutely no communication with them, I have *no* idea what they are doing in their classes.” For Sofia, this is a problem because she sees students in the program moving within levels from one school term to the next, and she is concerned about the continued support they get for the gains she reports they made in her class.

Underlying Sofia's comments about the lack of collaboration was a simple desire to create a system of exchange among the teachers. Given the limited available materials

¹⁹ This could be a tertiary contradiction (e.g. a contradiction between one activity system and slightly more advanced version of the activity system) in that the instructional practices, material selection and knowledge base of a teacher in one class could be more effective at targeting students' needs, goals, strengths and weaknesses than the other. However, further activity theoretical analyses from within the other classes and informed by those teachers' perspectives would be needed to make a fair claim one way or another.

for this learner population and the absence of an active professional learning community in this program, it was not surprising that Sofia craved interaction with her colleagues to gain access to ideas and resources.

We're so isolated that nobody has any idea what anybody else is doing. There's no sharing of materials. It's just and um, so many other things that you need for literacy levels, you know ... cutting up words, mounting to different colors ... and it just takes so much time and no one has the time to do it and if someone does have time, then only that person has access to that. There's just no sharing of information.

One can sense in her words that there is a level of anger or resentment about her isolation. The lack of opportunities for collaboration seems to not only be affecting her sense of place in the program but also her sense of camaraderie with her colleagues. Perhaps, more accurately, she is simply upset to see what she perceives to be a deterioration of this program that she has belonged to for so long. She later shared, "It's very depressing to see the direction things are going. ... There's absolutely no working together or, ya know, looking at curriculum as a step by step kind of thing ... because there's no communication."

As far as workshops are concerned, Sofia said, "I think I have attended one professional development workshop that I felt was beneficial. Most have been a waste of my time." She expressed her frustration at the outside 'expert' being invited in to share information with her that she can find no use for when working with her current learner populations.

They organize these options for professional development. Ok, you're gonna pretend to teach? Why not actually observe people teaching in the classroom and then talk about what's working and why. I would love to see what others are doing. I would love to see ... rather than having someone come in who has no idea what I do in my classroom.

She noted how the teachers could grow from having the opportunity to observe one another, if they were simply given the chance to rotate out of their regularly scheduled classes. “It would be so beneficial. We all have such different teaching styles.”

In the absence of well-established professional learning opportunities within the actual school, Sofia seeks professional development elsewhere. She notes that her “only opportunities for growth come from when [she goes] to conferences.” The school district does provide ‘paid leave to contract teachers (not hourly teachers) to take advantage of professional development opportunities, so Sofia does this as often as she can. She makes a point of applying early for the time off to attend conferences, such as the annual TESOL Convention. Although she doesn’t receive additional financial support, she enjoys the chance to recharge a bit, see what people are doing and bring ideas back to try out in the classes. For example, she told me

Going to conferences has been really helpful. I just love going to conferences because they’re so beneficial as far as giving me ideas. There was this great, this woman who gave a presentation on *The Little Dictator*. How she uses dictation. All the different ways to use dictation to teach. And there are just so many and she just covered every aspect of it. It was a fabulous presentation.

However, conferences, like one-shot workshops run the risk of inspiring teachers momentarily, only to have teachers return to their teaching context and resort to their ‘business as usual’. Sofia remarked above about a ‘fabulous presentation’ on using dictation in the classroom. Right after she told me about the presentation, she said,

That’s something that I didn’t do enough and I came back and I started doing it and of course, that went out the window with ... [laughs] ... And of course, that didn’t last long. You get new ideas and it’s inspiring and then you go on to something else. And yeah, it’s always inspiring to go watch someone else and you think, oh yea, I should try that.

This ‘loss of inspiration’ can be attributed to lack of synergy in the program. Teachers thrive, as do all social beings, in a community.

Professional Learning Opportunities and Theorizing Practice

As noted in the previous section, Nancy Ann valued the chance to observe other teachers, such as Eloise and her colleagues at the GPP and the resettlement agency. She said that she learned a lot from debriefing with Eloise after each lesson, “especially when I felt like my class was not the most successful.” She also appreciated observing her colleague at the GPP to observe “his techniques for teaching the alphabet and combining sounds. We chatted a lot about things to do in our class, what worked and what didn’t.” For Nancy Ann, the ‘practical’ is where she is comfortable. She finds it challenging to make connections between theory and practice.

I gotta say, in all the times that, even in my nursing career, and probably now, when you go to conferences you hear *theory theory, theory, theory, theory* and I think everybody would like to hear *practice*, all the practical little tips. Like somebody could say this is how I do it and it really worked for me because ... and then you can say, well you know that’s really neat and I’m going take this and this and this from what you said and try it out but when you’re way up here [holds hand above head] theorizing, it’s too big a leap. It’s too big a leap for people that are more concerned with day-to-day practice.

I asked her how she attempts to connect the two, because I have witnessed her implementing some very effective strategies in the class. She replied,

I think there’s a disconnect, I think there is a disconnect and that’s where it becomes you know, it becomes more stressful cause you think, *ok I understand this theory but how does it apply to me or how can I apply the benefits of this theory?* Just show me a technique that you use so I can steal it. Something like that ... just, you know, I’m a concrete thinker.

She talked about a “little sliding thing” that her colleague at the GPP used to help students work on slides and blending. It was a 3x5 card with a word family (e.g., -an, -at, -ap) written on it and a hole cut out in place of the initial (or final) letter. He then had a long vertical strip with individual letters that would work with the word family

combinations (e.g., ‘m’, ‘b’, ‘s’). He moved the consonants up and down and the students read the words aloud. Nancy Ann said that because “it’s simple and catchy” the students liked it and were not confused by the changing consonants. Nancy Ann’s penchant for the practical will be further explored below as I link the role of professional learning opportunities to expanding teacher knowledge and supporting teachers as they theorize practice.

Sofia tends to display more interest in theories and wants to know what is being developed in the field for work with adult emergent readers. She is, as mentioned, a career teacher. Teaching shapes her identity in many ways, and she takes pride in her profession. Facing this recent shift in her teaching context has presented her with new challenges and opportunities for growth.

Sofia: I just find it really fascinating and I know, uh, I know I could do a whole lot better if I had some time to think about what I do. I’ve just been doing literacy, you know, this is my fourth year and I just think I’ve learned so much through doing it and for me, you know, having students be able to identify a word, it’s really important ... and *first* and *last*. It’s really important and it’s [teaching concept of ‘first’ and ‘last’] something that I just started working on this year and as I continue to do this I learn more and I see my students that I had in the past really progress into other classes.

In discussions about what she believes works with this learner population, it is apparent that what she knows and does is grounded in her own explorations into the theories and practices for teaching literacy. There has been little professional development provided by the program, so she does her best. She questions her colleagues’ instructional practices, because she knows that many of them are very new to teaching in general, let alone teaching ESL to adult emergent readers. As a contract teacher with years of experience and degrees for teaching ESL, she has conveyed a sense of wonder about the

efficacy of untrained ESL teachers in her program, but has also noted in several conversations that no one really knows what the other is doing.

They have great intentions but, you know, I've been doing this for more than 30 years and um, and I'm still just getting [interrupted]. But, um, it takes a long time and so many ESL teachers have never had any, um, reading background as far as teaching basic reading. You know, we haven't had that elementary school background, and, so this has all been ...

That's why I found reading horizons very useful and breaking it down, and the phonics and breaking it into slides because it's so foreign and it's such a foreign concept to these students and I reinforce it over and over and over and over again and then, um ... I'll have students, um, start reading and they come to a word they don't know and they don't even look at the first letter, they just guess and I say *ok let's look at the first letter, what sound is that letter*, and you have to always take it back to that all the time and then they're like *ok*, then *oh yeah, ok*, and they can figure it out. But it's just .. um...

Sofia really enjoys puzzling over the best approaches to develop literacy skills in her class. She often shows a very complicated, if not scattered, reflective process that demonstrates her commitment to 'figuring it out' and theorizing her practice as best she can on her own. She walked me through some of her recent work, flipping through the notebook in which she keeps her lesson plans.

It's so funny because in Reading Horizons, I do a lot of this. [talking to self: Where do they have directions?] Read the letter name and ... they don't know this word [points to 'name'] and it's on their personal information form and I worked for a long time, in the beginning of ... yeah, we were working on recognizing these words, *first name, last name* ... and they were doing 'following directions' um, *draw a box*. Oh that was, oh [laughs] I will never do that again. And I had them writing some sentences ... with basic sentences, you know, with *dad, bag*, and I always fall back on Reading Horizons when I don't have time.

Ok, *my name is, my first name is, my last name is, I have a bag*. So they were copying that. So, then I had them do: *My name is. I have a bag. I'm in class*. Oh and then *Amina you said you are from Somalia. Jean you said you are from Burundi. Some students are from Bhutan. Some students are from Burundi* and you know because *some* was one of their words, *are*, these are sight words to, you know, have some context of these words, but you know. I was working on this last week and they're still guessing at this. They still don't know this word, *name*. And they've seen it so many times.

Those last few sentences show the inextricable link between beliefs and knowledge. Sofia is working through a reconceptualization of her practical and pedagogical knowledge, which is colored by her beliefs about what the students can and should be able to do. Her expectations about how quickly they should develop certain skills or vocabulary are likely tied to her years of experience teaching higher level ELLs. Nonetheless, she does attend to what developments they are making; she makes note of their learning, pays attention to social factors that impact their learning, e is concerned for the support they receive in other classes, and is able to relate their challenges to her own language learning experiences.

Well, it's so repetitive and to get the ideas across ... to get the ideas of a slide or a word; a lot of times I'm giving them this part but they're figuring out the last part. I know I'm making progress; it's just slow. But yeah, what they pick up is that last sound. They need me to do the slide, some of them, others have it down. And then some of them have it one day, and then the next day they don't remember a thing.

And some have high blood pressure and they're older and they have a lot going on in their lives and I don't know what ... I just keep trying.

And when I see those students in other classes, it's like whoa – it's really cool, but what are they doing in those other classes because so many of the teachers don't do any kind of, um ...

A lot of the students just memorize, and it's all sight words and that really limits, you know, how fast you can learn. I know that from Chinese. There are so many characters and you just have to memorize every single one and I had over 400 character memorized but I couldn't read anything and that's what 's happening in those other classes and that's what I can see, but you know, who knows.

It is inspiring to get inside Sofia's head and realize how much thought she puts into her work and how much she is genuinely concerned for her students. At the same time, it is disheartening to think that this only happening in her head. The opportunities to reflect and share ideas with me in our conversations gave her a unique opportunity to make

sense of her teaching with a peer, but the reality is that she is more often than not operating alone in her program. Perhaps the saddest sentence that I had to transcribe from our interviews was, “Everyday, I sit by myself in the faculty lounge during my lunch, and sometimes our secretary joins me.” This isolation, in particular, was not by choice. I will discuss top-down decision-making below, which is the source of the scheduling that leaves Sofia alone for lunch. However, regardless of class and lunch schedules, one pervasive form of isolation in the program is that experienced by all teachers in the absence of ‘time’ for professional, collaborative learning opportunities.

Program Support for Professional Learning

Given the benefits of professional learning opportunities to both teachers and programs, it is surprising when a program is not supportive of professional development. In some programs, professional development is honored and prioritized, while in others it may never become part of the agenda. Of course, between these two extremes there are various levels of support and numerous approaches to promoting professional learning within programs (see Chapter 2), which are often influenced by various macro-level constraints (e.g. funding, scheduling, policy).

Sofia often articulated her desire for more professional development opportunities, especially through collaborative engagement with her colleagues. Much of her disappointment stems from a perceived lack of support for professional learning in her program. “They’re really not interested in professionalization of the field. They’re interested in the bottom line and hourly teachers. And you know, ‘Anyone can teach English’.” She feels that the administration does not share her views about the need for

ongoing teacher development. She has also expressed her frustration over the fact that some administrators simply do not know what the teachers need to develop professionally because they do not have an ESL teaching background. She even suggests ways to target professional learning through peer observation that would additionally benefit the directors of her program.

[The director] really doesn't understand [the benefit of peer observations]. I don't know where [the assistant director] is on that level of understanding as far as how beneficial it would be to have teachers observe each other.

Part of her [administrator] job is, and this might be one way to approach it, she has to observe and write reports on teachers who are renewing their certification, but now that everyone is hourly, ... but, if we could have the teachers give her those reports and save her that work, and she could sign on the bottom ... it would be beneficial for both parties. It's a matter of finding out how it will help [the directors] as far as making their job easier.

Subject ~ Rules ~ Object: Implicit and Explicit Rules for 'Doing School'

An additional tension that exists in the relationship between the subject and object of both activity systems is that the students' interrupted formal education has an impact on their approach to 'doing school' that sometimes leads to frustrations on the part of the teachers. In the culture of formal education, there are certain expectations that teachers espouse for their classroom, which might be reflected in the implicit and explicit rules of the program. For example, an implicit rule might be that class begins at a certain time, attendance is expected, students come prepared and cell phones are turned off. Of course, these implicit rules are arguably only implicit to those of us who have had formal educational experience and 'training' including the teachers, who may not be taking into account the importance of teaching students exactly what is expected of them.

Nancy Ann provided a few amusing examples of student behavior that surprised her but not the other students. She recounts the time one student in a hot classroom pulled her t-shirt up and tucked it into her bra, momentarily, until a few minutes later when she pulled it completely over her bra. The other students were fine with it, but Nancy Ann took the opportunity to make light of it and turn it into a teaching moment about ‘how to be’ in class. While observing Sofia’s class, I observed a Karen student leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, spitting onto the floor.

In many community based adult language programs similar to the GPP, the rules can be less firm than in other language programs, such as those housed within school districts as is the BFA. In those more informal settings, potential distractions are abundant. In Nancy Ann’s classes at the GPP, students took phone calls, made phone calls, arrived late, left early, left temporarily during class for various reasons, such as the call to prayer, were visited by their children with requests for house keys, food, or simply attention and, of course, had small conversations in their native languages with one another.

These types of behaviors can be distracting to the teachers at the very least and certainly earn their place in the activity system as a tension due to the failure of rules to effectively mediate the teaching and learning activity. However, a tool (rules) is only as effective as the training to use that tool. In this situation, the rules are unknown to the students who have not had formal education experience and the rule-based training can be difficult for teachers to deliver given the language proficiency of the students. Again, as with most contradictions in these activity systems, the power of professional learning opportunities to create a mediational space in which to negotiate these breakdowns is

evident. Discovering ways to harness that power is a critical first step toward expansive transformations in these activity systems.

Subject ~ Division of Labor/Rules ~ Object: Top-Down Decision-Making

Tensions between the subject and division of labor impact the teachers' actions toward the outcome. As noted in Chapter 3, divisions of labor often reflect vertical and horizontal distributions of power within the activity system. In these activity systems, the key contradictions between these components are vertical and exist as a result of the myriad top-down decisions that impact the teachers, but fail to seek their input. They are also guided by rules within the system, so it is multifaceted contradiction. The key tensions I will present in this section address the student intake and assessment process and top-down redesign of programming.

Intake and Assessment

In both activity systems, the teachers reported that they had nothing to do with the initial intake and assessment of the students in their programs. Upon arrival to a program that receives funding by the state, students are required to complete a Student Education and Occupation Plan (SEOP). It is mandated that there be at least one goal listed on this intake form and it must come from the students, not the individual who completes the form. The goals collected on the SEOP target both educational and occupational goal setting, and therefore the intake provides a good opportunity for critical information gathering that could guide the teachers in determining appropriate learning objectives, choosing a curriculum and lesson planning.

The tension arises, however, when the individual completing the intakes with the students either fails to address educational and occupational goals with the students or does not relay that information to the teachers. Additional critical information beyond the intake is assessment data (e.g., students' results on the BEST Plus or CASAS test). In some programs, the teachers are the trained and certified proctors of the assessment measures and can therefore be involved in the testing process in order to more closely identify the areas to target through instruction. When teachers are not involved in the testing process, they benefit from receiving the results of the tests to get an idea of areas in which the students are facing the greatest challenges. Unfortunately, these processes are not always transparent to the teachers and a potential scenario that can unfold is that experienced by both Sofia and Nancy Ann. Sofia explained how the process works at the BFA.

When students enroll, they are interviewed by the secretarial and testing staff. This is when their SEOP is completed. They are tested using the CASAS test and placed into their classes. Two years ago and before, all of the teaching staff was involved in doing the SEOPs and testing, which gave us a much better idea of our student population. However, we've moved away from the teachers having as much involvement in testing or the registration process, where students are asked about their goals or what classes they want.

She goes on to say:

At the moment, we are sometimes informed of when our students make a level gain; however, we get no feedback from the test. CASAS was designed to guide instruction for adults by indicating what areas students were weakest in. The teachers get none of that information. When I was working with testing, we had the TOPSpro program that allowed us to print out student results based on their test sheet. We have gone back to grading the tests manually, so that input is lost.

Table 6.1 provides information from the CASAS website, relates the purpose of the TOPSpro program and frames Sofia's disappointment in her program's decision to do away with this component of the assessment:

The greatest impact of these changes in the division of labor within the activity system was decreased access to important information about what the students want to achieve in the program and what challenges they face in their language learning and acquisition process. In some cases, awareness of the test structures can help teachers support students through test preparation. For example, if teachers are familiar with the format of the tests, they can be sure that they address certain elements from the tests, such as critical directions for exercises (e.g., *Circle. Underline. Fill in the blank.*), and particular skills,

Table 6.1: Description of TOPSpro reporting program to link instruction and assessment.²⁰

<p>TOPSpro automates CASAS test scoring and quickly generates reports that help instructors and students link assessment to instruction. Used together or independently, these tools can eliminate tedious, time-consuming tasks by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatically scoring CASAS tests • Tracking student and program outcomes and progress • Generating reports for students, teachers, and program administrators • Providing individual, class, and agency-wide profiles of skills • Collecting student demographics • Managing data for state and federal accountability
<p>This leaves teachers and administrators more time to focus on building their programs by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluating test performance to better target instruction • Encouraging students by demonstrating their progress and learning gains • Establishing demographic data to define program needs • Demonstrating competency achievement • Building student test and program history • Managing data and classes • Complying with federal and state accountability requirements

²⁰ Retrieved from <https://www.casas.org/product-overviews/software> on November 12, 2011

such as locating a name or number in a phone book, which is an actual item on the BEST Plus literacy test

Nancy Ann said she was “not as familiar with the testing and scores as most of the teachers,” but she still made a point of investigating the test by discussing its components with a colleague. “I have used some aspects of the test for lessons - personal information forms, calendar dates, addressing an envelope. I can gauge how students do on these exercises and get a sense of how they meet testing targets.” Arguably, she should not have to give sample portions of the test in her class to know how they are doing on the test, but in doing so, she is indirectly giving them additional practice with tasks that they will see on every literacy test and in the ‘real world’.

As with many tensions in the activity system, those related to assessment could be targeted through the reformulation of actions around assessment, including the choice of assessment tool, the availability of results for teachers and necessary training in interpreting the results. Nancy Ann noted that the test scores are available to teachers on a form that the students bring with them on the first day of class. This was our exchange about assessment information:

- Nancy Ann: I have to say that a lot of that, uh, that seems to have been missing is really something that wasn't really pointed out to me or that I didn't notice. It's like I'm catching on more. So like the testing levels or the scores, the raw scores are, uh, when... so when a new student comes, they often have a paper with them that has their name and their score on it. So it's not totally unknown.
- Rachel: So, what do you do with that information? Do you write it somewhere? Do you keep track of it?
- Nancy Ann: Well, I haven't but it sounds like it might be a good idea to do that or at least have some idea, because since they're trying to level the groups, everyone is supposed to have similar scores.

Language assessment is a vast field unto itself. The fact that teachers are not familiar with the assessment process or interpreting the scores can be problematic when attempting to target the objective of an activity system. Professional learning opportunities will, again, provide that mediational space for program administrators and teachers to collaborate and democratically select assessment practices that best fit the program (e.g., for funding, tracking), best measure student gains (e.g., in class assessment) and provide teachers with useful information to inform instructional practices.

Top-Down Program Decisions

There are many decisions made about the structure of programming that can impact teachers and students, ranging from class scheduling to the impact of funding sources on program offerings. Some of these decisions that appear to be coming from within a program are actually mandated from entities above the program, such as funding entities or policy makers. I will explore a selection of top-down decisions that impacted Nancy Ann and Sofia, and therein their activity systems.

In the case of Nancy Ann at the GPP, there was little top-down decision-making as the core of that model is partnership. There were occasional tensions related to scheduling and restructuring of class levels, however. One notable point of contention arose when the ELSP decided to reduce the class offerings per week from four days to two. In addition, they opted to restrict student involvement to two hours per week, as per their organization's policy. The tension here was presented because for six years, the ELSP had allowed students at the GPP to take advantage of as many classes offered at their level as they wanted; however, they moved to reduce class offerings, citing policy as

a factor (i.e., everyone else only gets two hours, so, therefore, that is all we can offer students at the GPP). This greatly impacted the students and tutors at the center, who viewed these hours together as important, not only for language learning, but for community time. Nancy Ann, already working in the capacity of a volunteer, offered to provide additional hours for the students, but she was not given the option. It was in these conversations that she was reminded that she was only a volunteer. Ultimately, this scenario, coupled with needing a paying job, contributed to her eventual departure from the program. Of course, now she shares the reality of mediating a new collection of top-down decisions at the BFA with Sofia.

One of the largest impacts on Nancy Ann and Sofia at the BFA results from systemic pressure from outside funding entities, such as DWS. The programs offered by DWS have certain requirements regarding how many hours students attend class to secure benefits and, ironically, that students be released from class to seek employment. The teachers are powerless against DWS in terms of arguing for prolonged, sustained English language instruction for students prior to seeking work. The tensions presented in this partnership with DWS include the impact on student attendance and a seeming misalignment of actions directed at the goal of the activity systems. The teachers are there to promote English language and literacy development. DWS is there to foster a quick transition into the workplace. The students are there for reasons we can only speculate. Without sharing a common goal, it is little wonder that there are so many tensions at this level. Two themes emerged in my conversations with Nancy Ann and Sofia related to the role of DWS. One addresses the impact on students of DWS

requirements, related to attendance and goals. The other addresses the impact on teachers as a result of required vocational training. I will present each in turn.

Student Attendance and Goals

It was surprising to learn from Sofia that she had 60 students on her class roll for a literacy level class. After a few observations, however, I noted that she never had more than 30 students in her class on a given day. She showed me her roll with the marks to show that all 60 of her students do, in fact, attend throughout the week, just never on the same days, yet Sofia attempts in her class to connect lessons from one day to the next.

Having different students every single day .. it's like, I have one, Amina, who comes every day ... but everybody else is not coming, so I have some students coming once a week ... Mondays and some come Fridays and it just makes it so difficult to have any kind of coordination and I'm just so frustrated with not being able to communicate my concerns to the administration without ... and so, just I'm really, really frustrated.

With relation to the purpose of the job interviews, both Nancy Ann and Sofia are confused about the urgency. Of course, we all understand the underlying motivation, which is political and has to do with finding a 'place in society' for the newcomers; however, lamentations about the expediency of the process center on the fact that upon securing employment, there is little opportunity for advancement because language acquisition was hurried. We are all aware that many of our students with lower English proficiency levels are working in the meat packing plants in Salt Lake City and Logan. Nancy Ann tries to understand the motivation of her students and likely projects some of her own insights onto them.

Most of the beginning students at [the GPP] were women. When I asked who wanted to get a job, only two out of ten or 12 said 'yes'. The others wanted to understand their place in American life and understand how they could help their

children. Male class members have been the ones interested in talking about jobs and seem to concentrate more on learning. As they say, 'No job, no money.'

Sofia and Nancy Ann framed the impact of these intervening entities on their classes at both the BFA and in Nancy Ann's later reference, another refugee resettlement agency that she worked for briefly.

- Sofia: You're constantly interrupted by caseworkers and they come in to take them out and off to doctors' appointments.
 Nancy Ann: You don't know why you are doing this.
 Sofia: And teachers are the lowest of the low.
 Nancy Ann: And with the testing, they take them unexpectedly. They have to surprise them because if they know they won't come to class.

[later]

- Nancy Ann: In that afternoon class [at the resettlement agency] I had a few people who were older and the emphasis was jobs, jobs, jobs. But I don't think they should be primed for jobs. They live with their children. And they're pushing jobs, jobs and I didn't think I was being effective. [The director] said the reason a lot of them are there is to get the benefit. They're there to warm the seat for a certain number of hours so they're family can get a benefit. And because we're not focusing on what they need. They say 'we don't want job.'

Macrostructures and the 'Struggle for Voice'

These conversations, while they often begin with an attempt to discuss classroom practice and theories related to teaching adult emergent readers, often come back to charged discussions about the various tensions in the system that exist due to its place in a larger macrostructure. It appears impossible to extract the activity systems from this larger context, and, thus, even classroom practice is impacted by decisions far removed from the actual building in which it takes place. The greater frustrations exist for Sofia who has been part of this network for three decades. In attempting to make sense of some

of these frustrations, I have uncovered a several sources of anger related to feelings of disempowerment and marginalization as a result of exclusion from decision-making, isolation from colleagues and lack of meaningful professional learning opportunities.

Sofia perceives the “whole system” to be “broken.” She says, “teachers are supposedly so valuable, and who makes the big money? The administration. And if administration is making that much more money than teachers, then there is this feeling of superiority that administration has.” She also has strong biases against administration, which reflect a belief that they are often former educators who “failed at teaching.” She remarks that they are not interested the instructional practices of their teachers. “What’s taught in the class is not important. They don’t give a flying flip because it’s the reporting that matters.” She has a very strong disposition about the ‘voice’ of teachers. On several occasions, I have inquired about her efforts to be heard or make suggestions for changes in the program. She has been silenced by her experiences, which I can guess are also informed by her strong personality.

No, I don’t try anymore; I just keep my mouth shut. ... It’s just not worth the, worth the beating up that you get when you try to ... you know ... The Russians have a saying: the nail that sticks up, gets beat down the most. And I’ve been that nail a long time, so I’ve decided... I’m just not going to be that nail anymore.

Her feeling is not only attributed to her personal experiences but those of colleagues over the years. They all contribute to her beliefs about the role of teachers in the larger system. “When good teachers speak up and say *No, we shouldn’t do it this way*, they are kicked out. Most good teachers cause problems because they don’t agree with the way the system is being run. They learn to keep their mouths shut and heads down until they get a pension.” All of these experiences, biases, dispositions, and emotions contribute to her

contextualized personal, practical knowledge. She has reconceptualized her role as a teacher and re-envisioned her teaching context to fit with these experiences.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Implications of the Findings

The support for teacher collaboration and establishing communities of practice in educational settings is strong. Wilson and Berne (1999) found patterns in their mainstream educational research that echo the sentiment that “teachers enjoy the chance to talk about their work, that it takes time to develop a community, that teachers have very little experience engaging in a professional discourse that is public and critical of their work and the work of their colleagues” (p. 181). Numerous teacher educators and teachers assert that teacher learning and teacher change take place when teachers are supported with opportunities to observe one another, reflect upon their practices in light of their colleagues’ practices and engage in “professional discourse that includes and does not avoid critique” (Wilson & Berne, 1999, p. 194).

Transforming practice is not straightforward and may be particularly challenging for career teachers who have been teaching and learning within one context for years and now find themselves in a starkly different context, as was the case for Sofia when she began teaching the literacy level adult ESL classes. Acknowledging the challenge in transforming practice and enabling teachers to participate in professional communities that promote risk taking is essential for teacher development (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

This review of tensions highlights three key benefits to cultivating professional learning communities within the adult education program. First, the words ‘community’ ‘collective’ and ‘collaborate’ in and of themselves underscore the sense of oneness and belonging that teachers will hopefully experience. The morale can be low when teachers feel isolated. They can become disenchanted and perhaps even angry at the notion that there is so much more potential for qualitative change and development in the program and therefore in their practice. Coming together as a community helps teachers overcome the ‘struggle for voice’ that Britzman (2003) portrays in her ethnography.

Secondly, collaborative approaches to professional learning, such as peer observations, lesson study, and study circles are immediately accessible by the teachers because they are based in their teaching context and reflect the learner populations with which they are working. They can discuss cases related to students they share and problem solve based on collective experiences. As with the EFL teachers in the Czech Republic study (Tasker, 2011), they can jointly develop theories and test these teacher-generated theories in the classroom. Tasker notes that “a teacher-directed collaborative professional development activity, focuses the teachers’ attention on gaps in their students’ learning by creating a mediational space that encourages sustained dialogic interaction about student learning issues that are central to teachers’ everyday teaching practice” (p. 204). Professional learning opportunities for teachers should, above all, be relevant and accessible to the teachers.

A final key benefit to professional learning communities is that the teachers are available to one another for consultation and feedback on a regular basis as members of the same community of practice. Teacher-directed approaches to professional

development enable teachers to “move beyond being not only consumers of top-down expert knowledge, but also producers of school-based, self-directed knowledge by adopting a ‘researcher’ lens” (p. Tasker, 2011, p. 204). For those conferences and workshops that do inspire them and provide practical insights that they wish to apply, they can rely upon their colleagues for ongoing motivation and engagement in a feedback loop with implementation, evaluation and revision stages. In this way, they jointly theorize practice, construct solutions and take ownership of their professional learning.

Limitations of the Study

As with all research, there are limitations to the present study. This study attempts to better understand the lived experiences of ESL teachers of adult emergent readers and provides findings based on two cases. Sofia and Nancy Ann are two unique individuals bringing their own set of beliefs and a range of teacher knowledge and experience to the classroom. This study has provided a picture of their reality as it played out over the course of many months in two particular teaching contexts. It is my hope that the rich descriptions and my ensuing insights provide enough information to the readers such that they can decide the extent to which this study is relevant to them. Having participated and presented in a number of professional learning contexts, I feel that I can safely assume that it will resonate with many readers. However, I concede that others will find it too particular to the participants in the study and therefore not significant to them.

Additionally, this study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, and, as such, it is strongly guided by my interpretations and, therefore, potentially influenced by my

biases. I have taken measures, as noted in Chapter 4, to ensure trustworthiness and keep my personal beliefs, assumptions, values and expectations in check; however, I cannot deny that my values merged with the voices of my participants in order to promote action through this study.

Finally, the central tenet to both rigorous qualitative research and activity theoretical inquiry is that multiple perspectives are honored and represented throughout the discovery and writing process. As this analysis was conducted within activity systems from the subjects' points of view, it is possible that the perspectives and voices of other community members were not sufficiently represented in this study. Given the scope of this dissertation, there was limited opportunity, space, and time to explore the respective activity systems of the administrators, caseworkers, other teachers, and learners. Where possible, I did contribute the insights that I collected from these individuals through informal discussions, but it would have been ideal to collect interview data from them for a deeper understanding of the situation. I have noted this as a recommendation for future directions in this study and activity theoretical research in general.

Contributions of the Study

Teacher knowledge is continually growing and evolving as teachers develop their instructional practice and come to terms with changing contexts and changing learner populations. For many ESL teachers of adult ELLs, this changing context is a byproduct of issues far outside of their control, such as which refugee populations will be arriving from month to month from all over the world. These seemingly arbitrary decisions about when refugees are resettled by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees do not

take into consideration the knowledge base or education of the teachers that will be greeting them in the classroom. This would be an unrealistic expectation that nonetheless poses a challenge to both the teachers and the learners.

As a professional teacher education specialist working with the Utah State Office of Education, I have been contracted to teach several workshops for teachers of adult emergent readers. In these workshops, teachers often list the challenges they face, which reflect many of the tensions discovered in the activity systems of Sofia and Nancy Ann, such as lack of available texts, uncertainty about how to teach reading, prevalence of mixed level classes, isolation, and lack of support for paid professional development experiences. Often, these workshops are the only opportunity many teachers have to meet with colleagues who are also teaching adult emergent readers, and without doubt, these formal professional development workshops are better than nothing, but largely insufficient on their own to promote teacher development and expand the teachers' knowledge base.

Expansive Learning Cycles

In isolating the key relationships and uncovering the tensions in the activity systems of Sofia and Nancy Ann, we generated action items to begin exploring the expansive learning cycles for these activity systems. Identifying the contradictions was only the beginning of the journey, and we are all hopeful that critical transformations will continue to take place in the months and years to come at the BFA and perhaps, throughout the state. Through these expansive learning cycles, we will start to

reformulate some of the negative tensions and contradictions within these professional contexts.

Some of this work has already taken place on the smaller scale. Having identified both Nancy Ann's lack of confidence and Sofia's feelings of disempowerment, I wanted to find a way to honor what they know and do and give voice to this teacher knowledge. During the course of this study, I conducted two workshops open to all teachers of adult emergent readers in the state of Utah. Both Sofia and Nancy Ann were invited to deliver a portion of the workshops as paid presenters.

Sofia presented a demonstration of the instructional practices she uses to target literacy skill development with the Reading Horizons text. She presented first-hand accounts of why certain techniques work in her class; she reported the development of her students' decoding skills as she has witnessed them unfold, and; she demonstrated how she scaffolds dictation exercises in her class through clear directions, modeling and peer support. Nancy Ann demonstrated how she integrates top-down and bottom-up strategies for literacy instruction using a sample lesson plan based on a chapter in Sam and Pat Book One. She demonstrated her flash checks for letter, sound and vocabulary activation; she showed the attendees how she works through a reading using comprehension checks along the way, and; she modeled the approaches she uses for multiple readings to develop fluency, without letting the learning get bored. Involving these two knowledgeable teachers in a professional development workshop at the level of 'expert' or instructor validated their practical knowledge and showed them that they do have something valuable to share with colleagues and peers. The feedback was very

positive and they each had several questions to field and compliments to receive when they were finished.

In addition to targeting their confidence and honoring what they know among a cohort of adult ESL teachers, there has been a good deal of resource sharing and dialogue that has both activated and augmented their teacher knowledge. As I learned about various programs and resources around the country that support teachers of adult emergent readers, I passed this information on to Sofia and Nancy Ann. I recall sending Sofia a link to a video from a series on teaching adult ESL compiled by MaryAnn Florez and Betsy Parrish, two leaders in the field of adult ESL teacher education. The video depicts Andrea Echelberger, an adult ESL instructor in St. Paul, Minnesota, delivering a Whole-Part-Whole literacy lesson using a Learner Experience Approach (LEA) for language teaching. The LEA is one way to generate a text based on a collective experience of the students and teacher in the class. Prior to filming this classroom segment, the entire class went shopping at a local hardware store. When they returned to class, the students, with Andrea's support, wrote a story about their experience. Andrea developed a number of activities based on the story to target fluency, phonological awareness, decoding skills, reading comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary development. The video shows how this entire lesson unfolds in the following class session. After watching the video, Sofia responded in an email, "I just looked at the ... video. I have heard about so many of these techniques, but it is so helpful to actually watch someone use them in a classroom." This is only one example of sharing that took place over the course of this study. There were various other opportunities for us to share ideas for activities, materials, websites, and professional learning.

Perhaps the most exciting development and the greatest opportunity for transformation as a result of this study was a dialogue that we have initiated between the teachers, the administration, and myself in a move to enhance the professional development opportunities available to the teachers at the BFA. In several conversations with Sofia and Nancy Ann, I asked them what would be their ‘utopia’ if we could do anything to improve the teaching and learning environment in the program.²¹ The dominant themes in these conversations were 1) more chances to collaborate with the other teachers to lesson plan, develop materials, and discuss curriculum; 2) time to observe one another in the classroom, and; 3) paid professional learning opportunities. In addition to these major themes, I also teased out their desire to be more involved in both the initial intake and on-going assessment of students so that they can better target learner’s needs when developing learning objectives. Finally, and perhaps the most challenging contradiction to address, is the top-down decision making in the program that impacts the teachers in many ways, yet fails to include them in the process.

After reading at length about studies on professional learning for teachers in both mainstream and language education settings, I felt that I had enough information to propose a plan to the administration at the BFA. I contacted the director and the lead teacher for a meeting to discuss potential next steps. I framed the conversation through the lens of what I had uncovered in writing this dissertation, in terms of what the research reports as effective professional development for teachers of adult ELLs and what central themes emerged through my study of the teachers’ activity systems. I presented some

²¹ At this point, Nancy Ann has not worked for the GPP in many months and she is currently employed at the BFA. Our discussions about moving forward and transformations that would better support them centered on this teaching context.

ideas for partnerships that would involve the local University, potentially a community partner, and myself as a professional developer and researcher. We discussed the possible structure and availability of support for professional learning communities here at the BFA. The conversation went very well, and I was invited to speak at the next all-staff meeting, during which time the teachers break into cohorts based on teaching context (e.g., alternative high school or adult ESL). Together the cohort of adult ESL literacy teachers will have the opportunity to confer and generate a plan for future professional learning opportunities. This transformation is in its infancy, however, the likelihood of increased teacher involvement and empowerment is strong. The most encouraging aspect of the conversations thus far is that the director is very supportive and wants to see the teachers get the support they need and want.

Promoting Activity Theory for Educational Research

In addition to the contributions of this study to the participants and the potential for transformations in their workplaces and practices, this study further contributes to the developing history of activity theory as a tool for catalytic research. As noted throughout the study, several disciplines are employing activity theory to address tensions and promote change and development; however, the majority of this work is taking place outside the United States. It is my hope that disseminating this research will draw attention to the power of activity theory as a great tool for contextualizing qualitative research that aims to explore the collective activity that encompasses all human cognitive development. A preliminary account of this research was presented recently at a LESLLA conference in Minnesota, resulting in a general “buzz” about activity theory. I

received emails from professional developers, academics, and students working with adult English language learners who were interested in what literature I would recommend to learn more about applying activity theory to both classroom based action research by teachers, collaborative community-based research, and research at the university level. I hope to see activity theory gain popularity as a research tool so that we can continue to explore human activity with the intention of providing a holistic perspective on situations while at the same time, moving activity systems toward a more advanced version of themselves.

Reflexivity of the Teacher Educator and Researcher

The impact of this study on me was perhaps the least expected of all the contributions of the study; however, as a language teacher, teacher educator, and educational consultant, the impact has been significant and is worth sharing. First, I have taken a very critical and reflective look at my practices as a professional developer?? for the state of Utah and as a teacher educator in general. I previously offered one or two-day workshops either alone or with colleagues on various topics but primarily teaching English to adult emergent readers. After all of these workshops, the feedback was very positive and the participants seemed to be screaming for more - more resources, more information, more ideas, more workshops. In hindsight and after completing this study, I have come to the conclusion that the positive reception of our workshops was more indicative of the poverty of available support for these teachers than the level of ‘awesomeness’ in our presentations. To our credit, I do believe that my colleague, Eloise and I have delivered some very important workshops, providing very useful background

knowledge on this learner population, effective top-down and bottom-up strategies for literacy instruction, important sequences to incorporate into classroom practice, resources for on-going investigation and a ray of hope for those teachers working in isolation. But, what did it look like when the teachers returned to the classroom and unpacked what we delivered? Aside from positive feedback on forms and surveys delivered at the end of the workshops, we have little insight into the long-term impact or effectiveness of our ‘interventions’.

I was most struck by this realization when I read the following paragraph in a chapter entitled *Developing Practice, Developing Practitioners: Toward a Practice-Based Theory of Professional Education*.

Although a good deal of money is spent on staff development in the United States, most is spent on sessions and workshops that are often intellectually superficial, disconnected from deep issues of curriculum and learning, fragmented, and noncumulative (Cohen and Hill, 1997; Little, 1994). ... Teachers are thought to need updating rather than opportunities for serious and sustained learning of curriculum, students, and teaching. Instead they are offered one-shot workshops with advice and tips of things to try, catalogues filled with ... activities for the latest educational ideas (cooperative learning, problem solving, literary analysis, or something else), ... six-step plans for a host of teaching challenges, and much more. These offerings get a steady stream of subscribers. Participation ... is the professional equivalent to yo-yo dieting for many teachers. Workshop handouts, ideas and methods provide brief sparks of novelty and imagination, most squeakily practical. But most teachers have a shelf over-flowing with dusty vinyl binders, the wilted cast-offs of staff development workshops. (Ball & Cohen, 1999, pp. 3-4)

Considering for a moment that my efforts at supporting teachers through one-shot professional developments could be viewed in this way was shocking and even upsetting. The reality is that this quote, though hard to swallow, is perhaps accurate.

I recall leaving professional conferences with wide eyes and big ideas, handouts and new materials weighing down my tote bag, only to return home and never re-read a

single handout or print a single article that I starred in a lengthy bibliography while absorbing every word of a presentation. It was never because the information was less useful when I got home, but rather because when I got home - I was alone. The buzz in conferences and workshops exists because, like a hive full of bees, there is a swarm, a collective consciousness to interact with and develop alongside. Some of the more prolific and rich times in my teaching career were during the early days in my graduate program when we existed within a tight cohort of ESL teachers and our weekly routine was to meet, brainstorm, problem solve, reflect on assessment and instructional practices and of course, vent a little bit. Through uncovering the tensions in the activity systems of Sofia and Nancy Ann, I am reminded how much I thrived as part of a cohort and how prolific we were with instructional design and program development. This reminder has changed me as a professional developer and teacher educator. My continued involvement with the BFA and other programs within this state will surely reflect this shift in perception and I will strive to implement community-driven, sustainable approaches to professional development, such as facilitating the establishment of professional learning communities in adult ESL programs.

Recently, I was hired as a higher education instructional consultant at the university and my position entails providing support to all instructors and teaching faculty through observations, consultations, instructional design and workshops. As I rounded the bend in this dissertation, I began to consider developing professional learning communities within the various university departments to avoid the one-shot workshop approach that appears to be widely accepted as ineffective, or at best to have temporary influence over practices. In roundtable discussions with our director and

associate director, we decided to implement this approach as a pilot with the intention of measuring the impact on the instructors and students through feedback sessions, observations and focus groups. We hope to observe the merging of effective instructional practices with necessary content in such areas as the health sciences, which tend to rely on more traditional, didactic lectures for content delivery. Hopefully, innovative practices within the professional communities will emerge with support from our consultants and thus will become part of the teaching culture within the various departments. We plan to establish the first professional learning communities in the coming months with departments that have already expressed an interest in working closely with our consultants to strengthen the teaching in their programs. I believe that much of my growth as a result of this this dissertation study will enhance this project.

Secondly, this study has greatly contributed to the formation of my researcher self. At the early stages of this dissertation process, I did not have an identity as a researcher. Every step of the way presented me with a challenge and I questioned myself through the entire process. Once I jokingly remarked that I suffered from ‘Imposter Syndrome.’ In my early experiences with research, I struggled to find my voice and understand how I could extract data on humans in a way that would be not only informative but also impactful while at the same time, respecting those from whom I was gaining knowledge. Through this process, I walked with the memory of an incident on a trip to Bolivia when our photographer kept taking pictures of the women in the market who were selling spices, grains and vegetables. One woman shook her head, lowered her eyes and held out her hand for money after he snapped her portrait without asking. Another two women in their bowler hats and colorful skirts actually threw ears of corn at

him for taking their picture. I was angry with him and begged him to stop, but he argued for his profession, claimed he was doing no harm and adamantly refused to give them money so as to avoid setting the wrong precedent. Our respective views on intercultural exchanges conflicted and neither was more ‘correct’ than the other, but they were strongly and emotionally informed by our personal values.

In the case of research, the following sentiment reflects my epistemology about qualitative research: “Objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower” (Lincoln, et al., p.122). My lived experiences, values, beliefs and biases will be present as I conduct research, but I will use my narrative skills and rely on rich, multi-voiced descriptions to share as much of the story as I possibly can to ensure trustworthiness. I have found my voice in a research paradigm that supports my aim to use research as a tool for promoting empowerment and social justice, engaging in the co-creation of meaning, informing communities of practice, while allowing for my intimate involvement in the inquiry process.

The level of reflection that I have experienced during this dissertation has promoted a closer look at each of my selves and the result is a better understanding of my identities. Researcher reflexivity, according to Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011),

demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives. We must question ourselves, too, regarding how those binaries and paradoxes shape not only the identities called forth in the field and later in the discovery processes of writing, but also our interactions with respondents, in who we become to them in the process of becoming to ourselves. (p. 124)

This study was born of an interest in effective strategies for literacy instruction and the source of that knowledge in teachers, but it evolved into so much more. I was inspired by early interviews with Sofia to dig deeper, to go beyond the surface of classroom practices and expose the myriad factors that have a direct impact on teacher morale and therefore teacher development and classroom practice. I was inspired by Nancy Ann to cultivate confidence and voice in teachers by giving privilege to the experiences of these women in this dissertation. I hope Nancy Ann, Sofia and I will continue to work together as colleagues to develop materials, explore practices, present at professional conferences and even shake things up a little bit.

In the future, I will continue to explore applications of activity theory to uncover the relationships and tensions in various activity systems. I am already conceiving of ways to apply activity theory in my current job to disclose tensions that exist within various university departments with regard to instructional practices, professional learning and student learning. I look forward to continuing my work at the BFA alongside my participants to develop approaches for reformulating tensions into opportunities for growth and expansive learning. This study does not end here because I have been changed by it and I cannot walk away, having packed my bag with data and generated a document for the ‘partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy.’ This dissertation, on the contrary, is only the beginning of a study, which will hopefully leave a legacy of transformations.

Future Research

This study demonstrates that exploring the classroom practices and knowledge base of ESL teachers is a complex endeavor that should take into account the multitude of factors that impact the teachers' day-to-day professional lives. Making judgments about a teacher based on learner gains on standardized assessment is only as fair as the choice of assessment for a given student population. Evaluating a teacher's classroom practices as a silent observer in the class with vast background knowledge on 'what works' for a given population is only relevant against the backdrop of that teacher's professional learning opportunities as supported by her program. In other words, this study has revealed that much of what may be viewed as needing improvement in terms of classroom practices is starkly affected by the institutional 'macro' structures within which the teacher is working.

I believe that three critical next steps should take place for this particular study. First, I believe that on-going, sustained work with Sofia and Nancy Ann should continue in the context of the BFA to set into motion the expansive learning cycles that will promote professional learning for all teachers in this context and perhaps serve as a model for professional learning in other community-based adult education programs in the state. Secondly, I think a third generation activity theoretical approach (Engeström, 1999), which accounts for the larger quaternary contradictions between neighboring and interacting activity systems could shed much light on the tensions uncovered in this dissertation. For example, a thorough investigation into the activity system of the administration as viewed from the director's point of view could open lines of communication in terms of what challenges he is facing from the state and national level

entities that shape much of the policy and funding decisions that impact his ability to support his teachers. Improved communication and understanding between the two activity systems could lead to a reconceptualization of teacher involvement in decision-making that directly impacts their practice through a more equitable distribution of power. Third, a teacher-driven action research study to explore the ESL classroom from the perspective of adult emergent readers through activity theory could be groundbreaking in terms of its capacity to give voice to the learners, convey ‘what works’ from their point of view and tap into their educational and vocational expectations and goals.

Conclusion

This study set out to observe teachers in the classroom to make sense of the thinking and doing that informs instructional practices for work with adult emergent readers in the L2 classroom. The direction this study took was unanticipated, but ultimately, I believe it took the direction it was meant to. Activity theory as an analytical tool in this study allowed me to peel back the layers of the activity systems that Nancy Ann and Sofia navigate on a regular basis as teachers. The undeniable impact of several factors on their activity systems have allowed us to identify key tensions that are essentially inhibiting their forward momentum, impeding their professional growth and undeniably affecting their students’ learning. In light of these findings, we were able to begin a dialogue with the administration at the BFA to create an action plan promoting sustainable professional learning opportunities for the teachers. In doing so, we have set in motion the expansive cycles of transformation that will hopefully have significant, positive and sustained effects on not only Nancy Ann

and Sofia's immediate teaching contexts (the classroom), but more importantly on the larger structures within which their activity systems are situated. If these transformations take place, then there is a potential for great professional learning and growth for both Nancy Ann and Sofia, thereby directly impacting their students in important ways.

APPENDIX

Professional learning communities or communities of practice embody the key ingredients for teacher learning that promote reflection, increase motivation, provide a sense of belonging, and deliver opportunities to theorize practice. In cases where programs are not providing ample occasions for professional growth due to issues of funding, capacity, scheduling or lack of mutual understanding, teachers should proactively seek out such opportunities. Teachers can access resources that will give them the power and knowledge to organize communities of practice in their programs or at the very least, to join a community of practice with teachers around the country. These resources include professional organizations, on-line learning forums, and local teacher educators and researchers.

Professional organizations provide extensive support and guidance to adult ESL and literacy teachers and promote the interaction between practice and theory. These organizations often have on-line publications of research in the field as well as toolkits for organizing workshops, study circles, lesson study, and implementing effective instruction (Burt, et al., 2008). Many organizations, including those that focus on ABE and adult ESL, such as Low Educated Second Language Literacy Acquisition²² (LESLLA) and the Commission on Adult Basic Education²³ (COABE) hold annual

²² Please visit www.leslla.org for more information.

²³ Please visit www.coabe.org for more information.

professional conferences. At the LESLLA annual symposium, researchers and practitioners come together to connect research findings to implications for policy and practice. Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages²⁴ (TESOL) has also seen an increase in conference paper and poster submissions in the areas of refugee concerns and adult L2 literacy.

There are some on-line communities of practice where practitioners can come together to discuss issues related to their teaching contexts and expand upon their knowledge base. One such resource is the English Language Learning University²⁵ (ELL-U), a National Adult English Language Learning Professional Development Network. Through the ELL-U, practitioners can partake in on-line courses and study circles targeting the needs of teachers of adult ELLs. Topics addressed through the ELL-U have included developing vocabulary, conducting reading assessment, developing oral language proficiency and SLA in action. The website lists the following benefits to joining:

- access to **free high quality professional development** through learning activities, such as online courses, training events, and study circles;
- opportunities to **collaborate** with professionals in your field across the country through a community of practice;
- ongoing communication with **subject matter experts** in the field; and
- access to the latest **research and materials** that support ELL evidence-based instruction.

²⁴ Please visit www.tesol.org for more information.

²⁵ Please visit www.ell-u.org for more information.

Another valuable resource is the ABE Teaching & Learning Advancement System²⁶ (ATLAS) housed in the Department of Education at Hamline University in Minnesota. This resource also targets professional learning for teachers in adult education and is supported through a close relationship with experts in teacher education. Based on the success of a 2011 study circle for teachers of adult emergent readers conducted by Patsy Vinogradov, ATLAS will be offering the study circle again in 2012 to provide opportunities for practitioners to explore research related to their teaching context, discuss effective practices, implement these practices, and return for reflective discussions on the experience, thereby, providing invaluable opportunities to theorize practice.

One final resource worth sharing is an exceptional collection of ESL teaching videos compiled by New American Horizons Foundation²⁷ with the help of teacher education consultants, Mary Ann Florez and Betsy Parrish. This series of eight videos depicts ESL teachers of adult refugee and immigrant populations carrying out lessons in actual classrooms. The series offers a thoughtful presentation of classroom events. Rather than just showing teachers a segment from an ESL class, the creators have interspersed interview clips with the teacher to provide insights into her decision-making process regarding the design and implementation of the lesson. In addition, there is a voice over that highlights key theoretical underpinnings for the classroom practices.

²⁶ Please visit www.atlasabe.org for more information.

²⁷ The videos are free to stream on-line at www.newamericanhorizons.org or they can be purchased as a DVD set.

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